Miss Moccasins

Marah
Ellis
Ryan

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Miss Moccasins

by Marah Ellis Ryan

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To

A. E. M.

The only "Anchor" I ever knew,

and to

my dear friends,

her children.

Los Angeles, California,
February, 1904.

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Miss Moccasins

I

THE PASSING OF FELIPE.

Two men faced each other aggressively across the table in a little adobe high up in the hills. For over an hour the hot argument had raged, and the settlement was not yet.

The sun was already sinking, and a last departing ray flashed for a space through the open door and touched the narrow brown face of the younger man, gleaming on his white teeth, his full lips so exceedingly red, and his glancing, restless eyes—the eyes of a trapped creature at bay.

His slender brown fingers rolled and tapped the cigarette on which the fire was long since dead. His last attempt at bravado against the dogged resolve of the other man had been an utter failure;—and he reverted to a side issue with a sneering flash of simulated rage.

" Bah!—Do you think I have no eyes to see?—that I am all a fool? It is for the woman that you stir up this hell about the money; it is for the woman that you—— "

" It certainly is," interrupted the other man, whose face was in the shadow, and whose manner was as cool as that of the first speaker was nervous. He rose and pushed back his chair with a movement of decision. "I've listened to your explanations and I've waited for your promises to pan out, Felipe, and they are just about what I expected when you made this appointment—no good! You've cut a wide swath for the past year, but this is reckoning day! Affairs are too much tangled now to be kept from your wife a day longer. I am going straight to her from here and tell her the whole thing—you should do it but you are too much of a shirk;—and some one has to!—For the woman? Yes! Not only for one woman—but two!"

"To hell with them both—and you along with them!" screamed Felipe, with the shrill fury of his Mexican mother in his voice. "You had first chance with them both; why did you not take them then? You track me down now because I, Felipe Darrett, took them from you! You want the name of another man, while you make the game your own; you——"

But the other man's fingers had him by the throat.

"You thankless dog!" he muttered. "You foul-mouthed cur! Ah!—would you?—none of that!"

For a revolver gleamed in the hand of Felipe, and the two figures swayed back and forth in the little room, Felipe snarling like a trapped chapparal cat, showing his white teeth and distorted lips—not red now, but white with rage at his own impotence. The other man was struggling only to secure the gun, but Felipe to use it.

Then in a flash it was all over—the gleam of fire—the deafening report in the isolated adobe dwelling—and the hands of Felipe slipped limp from the coveted weapon, and clutched for an instant at his breast where the cartridge had torn its ugly path. Swaying blindly forward, he caught at the table and thence fell headlong to the floor.

"Carmenita!"—he gasped, as his head went back in a nasty, spasmodic way.

The victor dropped the revolver beside the still form on the floor, and mechanically lifted his own hand and looked at it;—yes, it had grasped the gun when the shot was fired, but the fingers of Felipe had also been clinging to it. Who could say which of them had touched the trigger? He did not know,—and his victim would never bear witness in earthly courts again!

There was little pity or regret on his face as he stared moodily at the still figure, only a sort of blank, puzzled horror; and after a little he drew forward a chair and sat there, his eyes still on the dead face, while he leaned forward, his chin on his hands, and endeavored to weigh the consequences involved.

His mental arraignment of his own responsibility was clear, logical—and not encouraging! An accident? Yes, of course it was an accident. With twelve sane men on a jury, and a sane judge on the bench, and a level headed Public Opinion to approve their decisions—yes,—with that sort of a combination the "accident" theory would be accepted. But the man staring at the figure on the floor realized that seldom—very seldom—did fate arrange such a spectacle for the eyes of man. Could he hope that this would be one of the times?

For the man on the floor had his friends,—the master of one of the finest estates in the country was bound to have friends of some sort! Then his young and pretty wife!—widow now!—would not her situation appeal to the chivalry of a land ever ready to respond to beauty in distress?—especially if Beauty was possessed of generous rent rolls?

He doubted not the rent rolls had dwindled more than she guessed during the brief year the clever trickster there had held the reins of management; she had been little more than the bank for a gambler,—the vain, indolent, romantic fool!

Back of her fair face arose a vision of Don Felipe's own relatives on the mother's side,—indolent, grasping, gambling Mexicans of all ages and states of penury, living on the crumbs let fall from the table of their "most dear Felipe!"

The man grinned for an instant as he pictured the righteous wrath of those worthies. The loss of their dear Felipe would be a blow at their own stomachs, and he could fancy their emotional appeals for the life blood of the—it was an ugly word, but was the only word he spoke aloud—murderer!

He must have been intent there a long time, for as his voice sounded out through the open door, his horse, tied without, whinnied invitingly.

That aroused him. He must go! A half mile away the roads forked, one leading to the county seat ten miles away, and the other to the dead man's hacienda—a half hour's ride across the range. Which would he choose, the authorities, or the woman herself?

Mechanically he picked up his hat, but noticed beside it a pretty carved comb. In the struggle one of the men had stepped on it—a corner was broken off.

Not on the head of Felipe's wife had those amber beadings gleamed! The face of the man for the first time grew dark and pitiful. Two smoke-black eyes seemed to gaze at him in mute reproach and desolation from under the mantilla of the owner of the comb—too fine a mantilla, and too rare a trinket for a laborer of the vineyards or the rancheria garden.

Poor little devil! Her brief glimpse of paradise had been stolen from her, and now he had helped unlock the gates of her hell! What would become of her?

Her fate appeared to him to be the only humanly appealing thing connected with the man on the floor, who had given his last breath to her name instead of to his wife, the only question except that of dollars and cents to be adjusted in case of his death.

And this had been their trysting place,—this old, forgotten dwelling among the vines! Others would come here now, men and women with anxious eyes, some of whom had guessed—or even knew—poor Carmenita's madness. He thrust the comb in his pocket;—the least he could do was to save her from being mixed up with this!

He made a silent survey of the little adobe, to remove any other visible traces of her visits there. In one corner he saw tools of the vineyard, the only sign that the workmen ever came this way.

The place smelled close and musty, as if it had long been closed. It had evidently been opened by Felipe expressly for the interview he had himself suggested should be held here instead of at the hacienda. The windows were barred on the inside. If left open when a light was in the room, it would be seen across the entire valley. Felipe had opened only the door, which faced the hill,—clever Felipe!

Two chairs had been overturned in the struggle. The man righted them and stepped over the dead man to close the drawer of the table beside which the corpse lay.

Felipe had stood there at the table as he entered, and had closed the drawer quickly, as though taken unawares. In falling, he had caught at the handle and the contents lay exposed.

A revolver, the mate to the one on the floor beside him, a box of cartridges, just opened,—the man counted them, examined both revolvers, and grunted comprehendingly.

Obviously Felipe had been preparing himself for a visitor, and had scarcely completed his arrangements for entertainment when the visitor arrived. With only time to pocket one of the revolvers, he had thrust the other evidences of his preparation where they would be safe until needed.

At sight of them the man smiled, and the indecision vanished from his face.

"Who could have thought it? The pretty little snake!" he murmured softly as he looked at the man on the floor.

He left the drawer open, its contents undisturbed, and walked out through the open door.

"Humph! my good friend Felipe!" he continued, in the same softly confidential tone, as he mounted his horse and rode away in the red glow blending into orange along the horizon,—for the sun had wheeled down beyond the Pacific.

II

THE RETURNING CALIFORNIAN.

The night express rushing over the foothills to make up an hour lost in crossing the range, suddenly came to a halt with a jar and a quiver, causing timid folk enjoying their breakfast during the "last call for the dining car!" to give vent to their fears in the various ways used by people in a mixed assembly threatened with annihilation.

"Freight wreck ahead! parted rails! no one hurt!" was the reassuring cry of the attaches. "Our train will be delayed until road is cleared," they added later. "How long?—oh, six or eight hours."

There were tourists aboard of the catapult type,—the sort to go in a canter through the Grand Cañon. And to lose six hours from their "personally conducted" sight-seeing! There was an outcry, a hunt for the conductor, and a volley of protests when they found him.

"No help for it, ladies—very sorry of course—glad to do anything we can to make you comfortable. Telegrams? Yes, Tyler Junction is only a mile down the track. No,—no hotel, only a junction of the south branch to the mines and the stage route from Timber Line."

Then he turned to the one lady in the car who was traveling alone, who had listened but made no comments, and who had been up and dressed at dawn to watch the sun lighting the Sierras.

"Can I telegraph any message for you?" he inquired. "Your friends may be anxious"——

"No, I think not," said the girl, smiling a little. "You are very kind, but no one will be hysterical over my delay. I am a surprise party." Then, glancing quizzically at the exclaiming, protesting tourists—"Haven't you trouble enough without looking for more?" she asked.

A humorous twinkle shone in the conductor's eyes as he met her frank glance. The comradery of the American spirit was abroad in the land, lightening his day's work!

"Will it be an eight hours' wait?" she continued. He glanced at the others before replying.

"More than that. There is a landslide on the south branch, and there has been a collision. The wrecker for this division is over there. The late rains made the trouble. At the best, we shall have to wait most of the day. So, if there is anything I can do for you——"

But there was not. She returned to her enjoyment of the picture, spread in faintest tints of early spring to the far south. Palest of greens in the distant ranges, olive tints close against the black of the pines, and, high to the north, misty peaks, where the snow lay like a white cloud against the clear sky. She was drinking it in with parted lips and eager eyes, as if she had entered some longed-for land of dreams.

"If only there was a hotel at that junction!" lamented one of the "personally conducted"—"then we might see something!"

"Yes, it would be very jolly if we could get a carriage and look around," conceded another. "This is perfectly horrid!" Then she turned to the girl with a conciliating smile—a sort of appeal to a partner in distress. "Can you imagine anything worse?"

"Several things," retorted the girl. "You might have made the trip by way of Panama, you know, and been tied on donkeys' backs to cross the ranges, like they used to do before the days of railroads. You might have eaten tortillas and frigolles instead of your dining-car breakfast, and, altogether, you might have had a charming time,—if you had lived to tell of it!"

The woman addressed laughed with her companions, yet looked dubious.

"Did they actually tie women—ladies—on donkeys?"

"They actually did; and if a donkey slipped the trail, it was worse for the rider than a freight car blocking the road. My father crossed in the '50's that way."

"Oh—are you a—a native?" queried the other. "I rather fancied you of the East."

"What have I done to deserve that?"

"Done—deserve?" repeated the woman, mildly puzzled at the little ironic smile. "Oh,—I don't know exactly. Or of the South? When I first heard you speak to the porter, I thought you suggested the South,—your voice, you know!"

"If I am of a South, it is this South," said the girl, with a sweeping gesture to the lands spread to the far hills, "the most beautiful South in all the world." She laughed and blushed a little at her over-enthusiasm. "Of course," she conceded, "it's a bore for you to have to wait, but I would cheerfully camp at the junction for a week, or walk barefoot to the sea, just to feel California soil under my feet again!"

"How strange," decided the woman, contemplating the enthusiast. "Now, I can't fancy myself feeling like that about Pennsylvania or New Hampshire,—can any of you?"

None of them could, and after a few equally congenial exchanges of remarks, the tourists filed out of the car to view the overturned freight, and that task accomplished, they sauntered idly to the junction.

The Californian was ahead of them and was already making ,some purchases of Indian bead

Juanita

work from the agent, who had quite a little museum of baskets and trinkets in his office. He had spread out the finest for her admiration and received a good day's wages on the profit from the beaded belt, a pair of moccasins, and a string of really fine turquoise.

"I should like to put them on this minute!" she confided to the conductor, who was an amused witness to the bargaining. "My foot is on my native heath, and my name's McGregor. I want to celebrate—and I simply can't do much in that line with the complaints of those tourists in my ears,—they spoil the music for me. I hear you have a lot of colonists coming in now;—is that a fair type?"

"Pretty much," was the amused reply.

The girl shrugged her fine shoulders and walked over to a map of the region that hung between the windows. The moccasins and beads were in her hand and the belt she had thrown over her shoulder. Many eyes turned to watch her. She was by far the most distinctive woman of the train—or rather girl, for she looked scarcely eighteen.

Her plain corduroy of brown and the soft hat to match, had nothing of the masculine touch, so often suggested by such material. The jacket covered a waist of creamy silk, with a soft collar turned down over the brown tie. A tiny pin—an anchor set in rubies—held the knot of silk and was the only touch of color in her costume.

Her hair had escaped from the braids and curled loosely around her neck and ears. Her eyes were gray and chameleon-like in their swift changes, almost blue-green in repose, almost black when her enthusiasm enlarged the pupils until they fairly filled the iris; but changeful as they were in color, they were very keen in their regard, detecting most things within their radius. And the beautifully curved mouth told many delightful things without speech.

" Eight hours," she mused, looking at the map; " perhaps more! That means reaching Olivette at dark, an eight or ten-mile carriage drive after that, and no one to meet me! I hope Phil's wife is not a prim housekeeper, or one of those creatures of ironclad rules. One never can tell what a woman is by the letters she writes! But if she is like that, she will begin by hating me for swooping down on them, unannounced, and at bed-time! Hence, Anchor Darrett, the necessity of prompt and sensible decision: Telegram or no telegram? "

A little woman with faded blue eyes, and a green veil swathed around her black hat, who was moving away from the map, halted as she noticed the girl's examination of the crossed and re-crossed maze of lines and dots. " Excuse me, please," she ventured after a brief hesitation, " but are you going on the stage?"

" Stage? No. I'm wreck-bound and I'm waiting on this train."

" Oh, I didn't know. I saw you looking at that part of the country," she continued, mildly apologetic. " I was hoping there would be some lady on the stage besides myself. I'm going to Hermosa Dam."

" Hermosa, Hermosa Dam?" echoed the girl. " Why, that is——"

" It is just about here," said the other, using her umbrella for a pointer. " I am too short-sighted to be sure, and that map is hung for tall folks; but I think it is about there."

" So it is," assented the girl, after a closer examination, " but—but I never supposed it could be reached by stage from here."

" They say it was the only way to reach it before the railroad sent a branch through here, and even now the railroad has to make a big circle to catch the valley freight, while the stage road goes straight across."

" You are sure it goes to Hermosa, the place near Olivette station?" queried the girl, delighted, yet doubtful.

" Yes, that's the place. But the dam, the new dam, is full ten miles from the railroad. There is some talk about a branch road striking across from here, but it won't be yet awhile. There is quite a settlement at the new dam now, extra men to finish the work before the snow comes down; but I don't know——"

"Snow here?"

"Melted. From the mountains."

"Oh!" Then, after a speculative pause,—"What time does the stage reach the settlement?"

"About dark, when it's on time. I've been waiting here over two hours. They say it is late on account of the rains; they make the roads heavy."

"But if the train was on time, could you not go more quickly by way of Olivette?"

"Carriage hire from Olivette to the dam costs more than the stage rate from here," stated the little woman promptly. "You see it saves the entire car fare, if a person has time for the stage and don't object to the dusty ride."

"Dusty? There is not a speck of dust to-day; the rains have settled that and it is glorious! Time for the stage? Wouldn't you reach there just as soon to-day as by waiting for the train?"

"Oh, yes; sooner to-day, and cheaper, too."

"Then there will be one woman besides yourself on that stage," said the girl, with sudden decision. "What!—stay here among those croakers for a whole day, when I can be riding across the hills? Not any! Think of riding across those hills, as Dad used to do!" she added, under her breath, with a sigh of utter delight. "Oh"—turning to the amazed little woman, "I am so glad I met you! so glad you told me! I would not have missed going that way for anything!"

Her informant evidently did not see cause for so much enthusiasm;—a parlor-car journey was a thing greatly to be desired in her eyes.

"I ain't used to stage travel myself,—we called them mostly hacks back East, where I came from," she replied. "And I can't honestly say that I prefer a stage to a railroad, but——"

"But," said the girl impulsively, "you have not been hungering for the sight of a California hill for years and years, as I have! You have not dreamed, waking and sleeping, of one garden beside an orange grove, as I have. It makes all the difference imaginable!"

"Oh!" with a little accent of surprise and kindly curiosity, "then you are not a newcomer, like us? You are coming back?"

"That's it! I'm coming back to a little rancho beside a little river, where the dearest brother in the world has had the roses pruned and the garden planted every year in the hope that before the leaves fell I might get back. Dear old Phil," breathed the girl, with happiness in her voice and a mist in her darkening eyes.

"You've been away a long time?"

"An age! Ten years! With grand aunts, who adopted me when my father died. Oh, they were good as gold. There were three of them, and folks called them the Ogden girls until the youngest was seventy. That sort, you know! and I did care for them—dearly! but I never could see why—why—why—they stayed their lives out in that black land. Aunt Louisa was the last. She died only six weeks ago. And here I am! No more three-month summers for the rest of my natural life,—and no six-foot snow drifts closer to me than those peaks!"

"Ogden?" said the other, ruminatively,—there was a family of Ogdens lived near neighbors to us, back in Ohio. He was a doctor. My name is Watson, and I came out here to live with my brother, over in Kern county. But the place was not quite—not quite—all I thought it would be—so—I—well, I declare, Miss Ogden, there comes the stage at last!"

The girl stared a little at the name given her.

"Oh, I did not mean that I"—she began, and then remembered the traveling impediments. "But I must see about my traps. I'll be in the stage with you!" she added, nodding brightly as she left her new-found traveling companion and hurried in quest of satchel and wraps.

The tourists streamed out onto the platform to view that much-exploited California institution, the old-fashioned, four-horse stage coach, and the girl followed them and assailed the driver as he was exchanging mail-bags with the agent.

His practiced glance took in the trim perfection of her traveling dress, the general air of unobtrusive affluence: she belonged to the private car rather than the stage coach, he concluded.

"Alone, Miss?"

"All alone."

"Hermosa,—which Hermosa?"

"Which—why"—and the girl looked her blank dismay,—"is there more than one?"

"There is the Hermosa rancho, the Hacienda, you know. Then there is the old Hermosa dam, the one built by the mission folks, the old padres. Only a few Mexicans live at that corner of the place. We change horses there. And the new Hermosa dam is about four mile beyond." He had looked at her questioningly as he enumerated each point, but she did not indicate which of the three she intended to visit. Accordingly, he added, "The Hacienda is not on the road; it is four miles across from the new Hermosa dam."

"And we will reach it—when?"

"Well—it will be dark at the best, to-night; we are a little behind time."

"Is there any sort of hotel at the new dam, at the settlement there?"

He shook his head, good naturedly, but not encouragingly.

"Well, there must be some house where they would keep a stranger for a night;—they would not turn me out in January, would they?"

The driver smiled, as he glanced at her. "I don't reckon you'd find any one doing that along this road any month in the year," he remarked. And she laughed frankly.

"You make me realize that I am really and truly in the Californias," she said, as she counted out the coach fare.

"Any baggage, Miss?"

"Not a thing; it is all resting in San Francisco. I meant to come that way, but changed my mind at St. Louis. I shall have to telegraph about that, if I have time."

"Five minutes! Dinner at Berkley rancho."

The telegraph operator was busy, and after a moment's thought, she remarked that to-morrow would do—there was no real hurry. And turning to look for Miss Watson of the green veil, a name spoken beside her caught her attention, and the contemptuous tone in which it was uttered caused her to gasp in amazement or anger, as she halted abruptly and regarded with darkening eyes two men who had alighted from the stage.

"Yes," the older man was saying, "Felipe Darrett's another case of the same sort! Had some good, clean blood in him too, but the Greaser strain drowned it! He's neither fish, flesh, nor fowl, and as slippery as they make them. There's some talk of him selling out, bag and baggage. Well, the sooner the Darrett name is wiped off the Hermosa valley, the better it will be for the valley."

"Why," said the other man, in a conciliating manner, "I've always heard that the old man Darrett——"

"Oh, yes,"—and the speaker seated himself on a barrel, his back to the girl, and lowered his tone a trifle, because of some people passing in front. Neither of the speakers noticed the rigid figure of the girl, whose face was turned from them, facing the hills, but who was listening with parted lips and clenched fingers. "Yes, I knew him well, John Darrett, and a squarer man never lived,—square clear through, else he never would have married that Mexican woman. No man would have needed to, but Darrett was easy and did not know that. After she died he married a white woman, one of the best ones ever came over the range. All dead now but this handsome duck, Felipe, and a girl, a half-sister, somewhere in the East."

"Well, he must be clever."

"Clever! That's it! The tricky cleverness of the half-breed. But his head is not level enough to keep what he wins. He's got Hermosa affairs tangled up in hard knots already."

" I thought Mac Leighton was managing the Hermosa. Seems to me I heard once he was to marry the heiress."

" Darrett spoiled that,—blew down here from Frisco and eloped with the girl. Yes, she was really a sort of ward of Leighton's. The old man left the rancho and the girl in Mac's charge, you know. But he handed it over to her, of course, when she married. No one seemed to know whether he was broke up over it, or glad to get out of it! He left for Mexico anyway, and that was a year ago. Things have gone crooked with the Hermosa since then. He is needed there and needed badly."

" Who looks after his place? He had good property joining the old dam when I left."

The older man said that Mac Leighton owned it yet, but he had not heard who was running it, neither did he suppose that it was Galbraith, as usual. He added, however, with a degree of certainty, that it was sure to be a " reliable," for Leighton was one of the fellows who always had luck.

The girl, who had been listening all the while, sank down on a crate of bee boxes for some foothill apiary as the men arose and walked across the platform. All the brightness and glow was gone from her face. Her eyes were still turned toward the hills, but the varied greens were veiled in mist for her. The Indian trinkets slipped unheeded beside her.

"Dad!—Dad!" she whispered, as if conjuring something to cling to,—"Dad!"

"The stage is ready, Miss Ogden," said the little woman beside her. At first she made no sign of hearing her and the woman touched her on the shoulder. Then she arose and followed, bitterly, and whether through accident or deliberately, she made no attempt to correct the stranger's mistake in her name, as she had been moved to do a few moments before.

The station agent followed with the neglected belt and moccasins, as she entered the stage. She took them with quiet thanks, and sank back in the seat to face the two men whose conversation had taken away all of her anticipated joy in the ride over the hills. And this was her home-coming!

III

IN THE FOOTHILLS.

With a flourish of whip and lines, the driver swung his four-in-hand with commendable pride around the circle of the little hill, and gave the tourists a satisfying picture of the old days.

That was the California they had expected to see, the California they had read of! Only one item was missing, and they all felt cheated in consequence: not a gun was in sight, not a cartridge belt, not even a little silver-mounted revolver peeping from a holster; the driver and passengers all looked as safe and tame,—as Massachusetts!

"All but the stunning girl with the moccasins," agreed one of the men. "She looked like a California dream come true."

Miss Watson clung desperately to the seat and strap as the coach rocked and rolled on its way. Occasionally she cast appealing and deprecating glances at the others.

"I n-never im-agined it would be so rough as th-this!" she quavered, as a particularly rocky section was reached.

"I will change places with you, if you prefer this side," said the girl.

"N-no—thank you, Miss Ogden. I d-don't

know that I do. If we should go over that precipice, I don't think there'd be much difference as to which side I had been on."

The girl smiled and the older man chuckled, indulgently.

"Not the slightest danger, I assure you, Madame," he said kindly. "There, we are over the rough bit. You are evidently a stranger to stagecoach rides."

"I'm a stranger to the whole country," she replied, and settled back with a sigh of relief as the wheels rolled smoothly over a level stretch of ground. "I'm from Ohio, and we have no such gullies or acres of rocks on end—there!"

"Nor such January sunshine," said the girl, with a gesture toward the uplands, where shimmering rays alternated with flying clouds in a way most suggestive of April.

"Yes, it's fine for you folks that see it that way," agreed the woman from Ohio, "but I maintain that it is not seasonable. I've been over at my brother's place in Kern County, and I declare I was fairly sick of the endless sunshine and garden making in the fall. I never could get into the way of it. I'm going now to take the place of a teacher that's sick at Hermosa Dam."

"Why, I directed a teacher there yesterday," said the younger man; and then, as he noticed her change of expression—her utter disappointment—he added, awkwardly, " Of course she may not suit."

" More than likely she will," said Miss Watson, who could control her words better than her facial expression. Then with a weary sort of smile she added, " That's my sort of luck! I came west to take care of my brother's family, but he was married again before I got here. Married," she added with a little sigh, " to a hustling sort of woman, who doesn't need anybody's help! It was she who planned that teacher's place for me. It would be a sort of introduction to the school boards out here, she said. She's a fine manager."

The latter part of her communication was addressed to the girl, who seemed suddenly to appreciate the whole insignificant tragedy of the gray, faded-out life. Her sort of luck! Ever too late, always the one unnecessary addition! A life so gray the sunshine could not gild it. And yet with it all she possessed a sturdy sort of philosophy of work; she never expected more than second best, and was content if only she could gain that!

The little white teeth set hard, and a steely look came into the gray eyes. Was she, with all her strength and advantages, to succumb to the first rough wind of chance, when this little faded life faced its gales with a smile, and came out of the storms with energy to try again?

"She is heroic and perhaps no one has ever guessed it," thought the girl, contemplating the wearer of the green veil in a new light. "And I—they have always vaunted my personal bravery—all of them; yet I have collapsed and gone under at the first capful of wind! Little gray life, you've taught me the day's lesson."

But her buoyant spirits were quelled despite her philosophy. She no longer had the desire to share her joy and her dreams of joy with the chance traveling acquaintance. The others in the coach fell easily into conversation concerning the country, its picturesque past and its equally golden future. But the girl who had confessed it the ideal land of her dreams remained apart, and kept her gaze on the varied sunlit pictures they were passing.

Once she awakened from her over self-absorption to say kindly to the little school teacher: "You must give me your address in Hermosa. In case you find the position filled, I might be able to help you to another."

"Oh, you're real kind," fluttered Miss Watson. "Do you—will you be living there?"

The girl was conscious that there was an abrupt lull in the conversation of the men opposite, and framed her reply accordingly.

"Not exactly in Hermosa settlement, but I expect to find some friends between there and Olivette."

"I didn't expect you lived there, for you said your brother's rancho was near the river. There are nothing but creeks around Hermosa."

Then she fished around in a satchel she was carrying and found a card with an address written on it.

"That's where I'm to board, if I stay there," she said. "And if we get in late I suppose it is as good a place as you can find, too. He's some sort of overseer. The most of the ditch diggers and such like live below the dam. This place is American, anyway. I'm willing to take my chances with the most of folks, but I do draw the line at a Mexican table or a Mexican bed. If you ever could see the babies and pigs and puppies rolling together on the dirt floor,—well, they're just impossible!"

"Yet their ancestors were lords of the land, not so long ago," remarked the girl. "At least the Spanish were, and made the life here an ideal bit of Arcady."

"Maybe they did," agreed the Ohio woman, who lacked the imagination to see beyond the present actualities of pigs and babies; "maybe they did, but I never saw any of that kind."

The girl again turned her attention to the green stretch of the ranges, dotted with great bands of sheep or cattle, and with great grainfields springing into life with the winter rains, to the timber belts marking the water courses, and thence high up the hills, to where the pines were as a dark girdle beneath the snowy breasts of the Sierras.

The land she had loved and longed for!—of which she had been so proud!—the land she would ever see with the eyes of the spirit instead of retaining photographs of its mud floors, where the Mexican children played.

She had childish memories of an adobe where peppers were festooned like strung jewels from the eaves; of one immense rose tree covering every vestige of the dwelling except the door-way; of heliotrope thickets in which she would hide, half smothered with sweetness; a great garden of color and fragrance for which she had longed through all those bleak winters on the Atlantic Coast.

Pigs on the earthen floors? Maybe. Poverty among the ne'er-do-well? No doubt, for that is found everywhere. But there never was here the cold, shivering poverty of the far East, of that she was sure. All her memories of it had been of warmth and fragrance and music,—a harmony she had come back to seek.

Her eyes closed, and the men lowered their voices, thinking she slept. An occasional question from the school teacher made the conversation general. The younger man had moved over into the Santa Clara valley a year before, but retained some herds up in the hills, and was making a trip back to see about selling them. He was to leave the stage at old Hermosa Dam and go horseback to the rancho where he was to stop. The older man had an interest in some mining ventures to the south, and had been down looking over the country. He was now going on to the end of the stage line, ten miles beyond the Hermosa.

He had been in the country since '57 and was a storehouse of reminiscences, some of them tragic, others comic, all of them interesting.

The girl, apparently sleeping, listened to his graphic recitals of the history of the land, and pictured her father in that so far-away life. She tried to see the land and the people as he had seen them when the Americans were yet few and each rancheria held an ever ready extra horse or a well filled purse for the chance traveler who rested within its walls. Ah, the beautiful life of the people, who were too wise to waste life in the making of money!

" And that," concluded the historian as a finale to an interesting recital of local interest, " that's how the old Hermosa reservoir was built; a thousand Indians, they say, besides the Mexicans and the Spanish guard. The stone work alone is wonderful, considering that the workmen were untrained and had never known what work was,—wonderful! "

" The padres made slaves of them; wasn't that about it? "

" I reckon. Their work shows a tremendous lot of power, yet there is no record of the workman getting anything but his clothes and rations."

" I always heard," ventured the school teacher, " that the most distinguishing trait of an Indian was that no earthly power could make him work."

" Then the padres assailed them with a power either heavenly or infernal," stated the old man, " for they certainly did work in this country. I guess the priests first scared them into it; told them they'd all go straight to hell if they didn't, and showed them lurid pictures of the torments there. Oh, they use the same tactics with other folks than Indians, and it has won all along the line."

Miss Watson gasped a little; she was not certain that the interesting old times were not almost blasphemous. But the story teller was jovially unconscious of her shock, and, after a moment's thought, he continued:

"But they were wonderful men, those same old Mexican or Spanish priests. No group of equal mentality ever put foot on American territory, no matter what country they sailed from. And it wasn't all hard labor and slavery they enforced, not by a long sight. They had their feast days and junketings and barbecues on all sorts of occasions. Why, when the water was turned into the flumes from this same old Hermosa Dam there was a festival of a week, so the older Mexicans and Indians tell, a celebration in the church, high jinks generally, and the blessing of the water as it reached each station in its twenty-mile run."

"Queer folks, they were," commented the other man. "We Americans get as much work done, but dispense with that sort of fandangoes."

"Yes, we do," assented the old-timer, slowly. "We do. Yet it always seems to me that their sort of habits and customs belong by right to this land. You younger men may not feel it, but the stamp of the Spaniard is indelible here to the older folks. The land will never belong to the American as it did to the padres—never. The Americans and the other foreign element make money here of course, but they are so many blots on the landscape. The fact that I am one of the blots doesn't affect my vision any."

The girl listening felt herself liking the speaker. He pictured her ideal California before the coming of the colonists, and the incongruities. He spoke with sympathy and conviction:—but his conviction had also been very apparent when he discoursed of the Darretts on the platform of the junction, and that memory hardened her heart.

It was two o'clock when the stage reached Berkley's rancho and the steaming horses were led away, while Mrs. Berkley, with the help of two Chinamen, served the long-waiting dinner.

It was a space for relaxation and usually the further opportunity for acquaintanceship between the outside and inside passengers. But while the rest chatted and exchanged information of a local nature—mainly in reference to the late rains and their disastrous floods—the girl walked alone through the rancho garden, responsive to the warm tingle of springtime in the blood, the soft kiss of the wind on her cheek, and the springing green of daffodils at her feet. A yellow jasmine was putting out its first venture in color, where it was trained over the south wall, and hyacinths were thrusting upward their faintly tinted spikes of pink.

From the porch came whiffs of tobacco smoke and voices. The old-timers were discoursing of the freshets and the havoc they created,—boiling caldrons in some of the cañons, and two bridges put out of business by them. The driver confessed that he never felt dead sure about any of the bridges except the one at the old Hermosa.

" That's all right, you bet," he remarked. " I wish I was as sure of the Darrett dam at the new works. That thing was started wrong in the first place; never even went down to hard rock. Leighton saw it was no good when he started in to run the Hermosa. He stopped it right there and prosecuted the contractors. But Darrett—well, he's only tinkering it up enough to boom the place for sale. He don't care a Continental if it sweeps the Hermosa valley the day after the deed is made. It's mighty shaky and a few rains like that of last week's——"

"I would not be so uneasy about the rains as about the snows up there," said Berkley, with a motion of his pipe towards the mountains. "Notice the mud in the creeks; that's not from rains. It's the hot sun on that snow for the past three days—too hot for the season. Well, the new Hermosa drains the south side of that range,—a bad combination! If I had business along that valley, I'd keep as clear of the water courses as the business would let me."

"You're a nice Job's comforter," remarked the driver, "considering that I have to follow that cañon for three miles every other day or quit the road. Damn Darrett and his tinkered reservoir!"

"That's the sort of blessings will follow the turning on of the water in the new Hermosa," remarked the older man, turning to his companion of the stage. "Not exactly an improvement on the fandangoes of the padres, is it?"

"Hardly. And you all appear to be of one mind about Darrett. Where is he from?"

"Oh, a pretty fellow, out of a picture book!" said the driver, sarcastically, as he moved off to meet the fresh horses that were being led from the stable.

"A fancy sort of caballero, you know, Don Felipe Darrett; one of those slim, black devils, all eyes and guitar songs. Always did seem to me like he ought to wear a cloak and hat with a feather in it. But some fool women like that sort of cattle, and he got the richest girl in the country.—Won in a walk, too!"

"He's from over by the river," said Berkley. "Had a little pocket rancho over there somewhere. Had it left to him, I guess. I heard he lost it lately in some deal."

"I remember that place," said the older man. "One of the prettiest I've ever seen. John Darrett took a leaf from the padre's books, built an adobe over there, sunk a well, and lived for a few years like Adam in Eden. He had sailed the world around and settled at last in what he considered the garden spot of the earth. I remember he called it 'Treasure Trove.' After his wife died, he only lasted a few years, and now you say this young cub has got rid of the place? As you say, it was a sort of pocket rancho—no great amount of land—but it was a beauty!"

"So is Hermosa," remarked Berkley. "But he will get rid of that, too, unless some one stops him."

"Gambler?" asked the stranger.

"Worse;—he's a fool speculator, who relies on what he calls his own judgment; though he does gamble, too."

"But it is his wife owns Hermosa, old Gonzales' daughter," stated the old-timer; "he has no title to that."

"But he owns the woman," retorted Berkley. "That seems Darrett's strong point,—to deal with women, when possible, instead of men. I did hear that little 'Treasure Trove' rancho, near Santa Barbara, was partly owned by a half-sister of his in the East, but I guess she has taken Don Felipe's measure, and keeps her distance. Anyway, he managed the deal—just as he will manage Hermosa, if he is not stopped."

"Can't his wife put on the brakes?"

"In Frisco most of the time. This section is too slow for her. She needs a brakeman herself."

"Mac Leighton could and would put a spoke in their wheels if he was here," said the old-timer. "I don't know of any one else that could. Old

Gonzales left him a lot of power, and the time limit has not expired."

"Leighton got back from Mexico to-day, and had breakfast here," remarked Berkley. "Joe Galbraith had met him with horses at the junction, and he was rushing across at a double quick. Joe's been running his rancho for him."

"I told you he'd have a reliable," said the old-timer, "and Felipe Darrett had better crow small for a while, if Leighton has struck the Hermosa valley; for Leighton has the luck!"

The girl in the garden heard no more, for the horses were being hitched to the stage. In a few moments she would have to join the idly gossiping crowd and listen for four—six hours to the voices echoing and agreeing in the curses heaped on one name.

Not a word of dissent had been uttered in his defense. The opinion appeared to be unanimous; the name of Darrett was one not only hated but despised. She had the courage to fight hate and it under foot,—but contempt!

For one moment she had a wild desire to let the stage go without her, to keep away from that one regularly recurring topic. No one expected her; for a day, even a week, she could stay here by this garden and prepare herself to face the new conditions. No one would know. The people might call her Miss Ogden, as the school teacher had done, and she need not correct them, for she would probably never travel that road again. It was a lovely place, and here in the garden——

But as she looked about her her eyes filled with tears. The garden! All her California dreams had centered around a garden, one in which a rose tree grew much as this one by the wall, one in which color and fragrance ran riot. And ever among the poppies and roses she had gone hand-in-hand with the slender boy, whose eyes were of black velvet in their softness, whose words were softest Spanish, and who accepted her baby worship with the caresses of conscious superiority. She was his little slave to fetch and carry, content if he patted her hair or kissed her cheek, and wildly happy during the hours when they could evade the coffee-colored Luigo or her nurse, Dolores, and sally forth on quests of adventure without the orange grove or even up the hill where the vineyard was.

"All ready, Miss," called Mrs. Berkley from the porch. "The gentlemen have walked ahead, but the stage is waiting."

The girl dashed the mist from her lashes and ran up the steps.

"It's a long, rough ride to Hermosa," continued the woman, amiably, "but the sooner it's over, the sooner you can rest."

"Yes—the sooner it is over." And the next instant she had her old seat in the corner and the horses had lunged forward for their pull up the hill.

She and Miss Watson had the inside to themselves.

"You look pale and sort of sick," said the little woman. "Aren't you well?"

"I suppose I'm getting tired; I've been traveling for a week."

"My! I took it in easy stages when I came out from Ohio. I seemed to have either friends or relatives scattered all along."

"I have neither," said the girl, as she sank back in the corner with closed eyes. A little later she straightened up and unlaced her tan boots.

"They were all right back East," she remarked, "but they seem choking me now,—too high and warm."

"Why don't you put on the Indian shoes for the rest of the ride? It is warm to-day, and you look tired out all at once. Your skirt is plenty long enough to hide them from the men when you are sitting down."

The girl made a gesture of disdain.

"The men! I'd festoon myself with beadwork, for all I'd care for them. Gossiping old women!"

In a trice the tan boots were tied in a bundle by their own laces and thrust under the seat, and the gay moccasins with their trimming of crimson and green were on her feet.

Then with a little reckless laugh she unbuckled the brown leather belt and fastened the Indian girdle in its place. While the necklace of turquoise was tied around her neck by its red cotton strings.

"A little incongruous, perhaps," she conceded, "but the old man is right; we really are a discord in the land of the Mission fathers, and a trifle more or less makes no difference. He is right. It was not for our sort they built great viaducts and planted vineyards. I wonder their ghosts don't walk and uproot trees or tumble down rocks on our highways."

Miss Watson looked her disapproval of any such retaliation on their part.

"Oh, I hardly think they would do that, even if they could, though they did make slaves of the Indians." Then, after a little pause, she added, reflectively, "I am not especially alarmed about rocks or trees, but those men did make me nervous about the Hermosa dam. They say that that man Darrett had the workmen's cabins put up below it instead of above it. Of course, I know nothing about such construction, but——"

"Neither do I," interrupted the girl, "nor want to! I was glad the men walked ahead, that we might be free of the subject."

"It did seem to interest them a lot," acknowledged Miss Watson. "You see the Gonzales family, so far as money goes,—and it goes a long ways,—were the big folks of this section, and when this Darrett got the daughter, it made a sort of sensation, I guess. And the new dam,—yes, I heard some talk of that over in Kern County, but——"

"Oh," breathed the girl between her teeth, as she turned her face to the cushion.

"Sure you're not sick?" queried the school teacher, looking at her kindly. "No? Well, I'm glad to hear it, for you do look pale. There! we've caught up with the men at last. And there is one comfort we can take to ourselves: all the ideas concerning that dam won't affect the stonework of it a mite. And none of us will die till our time comes!"

The girl stubbornly kept her face to the window as the men climbed in, panting and amiable. They had spoiled the beauty of her day for her, and she did not mean to give them the benefit of the light of her countenance.

Her heart leaped up as they passed a group of horsemen, who swung their sombreros and called a greeting to the driver as the coach passed. How fine and strong and free they looked! That was her California.

Once a solitary rider loped far across a rolling hill and out of sight in a belt of timber. Her eyes followed him enviously; that was the life she had come back for: To ride care free over the ranges! —to stay out alone under the stars, if she chose! —to get away from the discords and conversations of the crowded places! And all she had gained was a space in a crowded stage, where she had to be careful that her feet did not preëmpt the space of her neighbor, and where she feigned sleep to avoid converse, and shrank from hearing her own name mentioned.

At old Hermosa, where Pedro, the uncombed, kept the stables, the horses were changed and bad news awaited them.

The bridge at Quartz Creek, two miles ahead, had gone down. The stage would have to make a detour to reach the settlement. The driver used some reckless language and advised the ladies to stay over with Pedro's wife, Maria. In the old days the dwelling there had been a favorite road-house, but the accommodations had dwindled until the stable was the only remnant living up to its former reputation.

Miss Watson decided she would just about as soon go to the bottom of Quartz Creek, while the girl watched one of the passengers, who secured a horse from Pedro and went loping away alone across the range.

" He is one of the Hermosa foremen, lives this side of the dam," said the driver in reply to her questions. " It's only five miles across there to the settlement, but wheels will have to go a full dozen to reach it to-night," he added, ruefully.

" You mean it is only five miles across there to Hermosa? "

" We are on Hermosa ground now; it is a sort of a triangle and this is one of the corners. Over there "—and he pointed with his whip—" is the Hacienda, as they call it here, the homestead, you know. Most of this section is Mexican and everybody uses old style names. How far? Oh, about four miles. The settlement is more to the right. Yes," in reply to another query, " in the saddle it would be straight riding,—no trick at all. But there is a bluff wheels can't go over, and I've got to go the circle. If you ladies can stay over here to-night, the other coach will take you on in the morning. I should advise it, for there is no telling what we may meet up in the gulch of Quartz Creek."

"Thanks—yes, I'll stop," said the girl, stepping from the stage, too elated at being free to remember the bizarre Indian trappings, in such striking contrast to her trim traveling costume.

" And you, Miss? "

"Oh—I couldn't—indeed, I couldn't!" protested Miss Watson, a vision of babies, pigs and puppies, heightened by the smiling presence of the corsetless Maria in the doorway, arising in her mind at the thought of the Mexican menage. "I couldn't eat a bite, you know; I'm sure I couldn't. So——"

"All right,"—and the crack of the whip cut her sentence short; the rest of her reasons were drowned in the clatter of hoofs and wheels.

But a moment later she thrust her head out of the carriage window and waved her hands frantically.

"Your shoes!" she screamed, above the racket and rumble. "Make him stop till you get your satchel and your shoes!"

"Keep them for me!" called the girl, who was laughing at Miss Watson's dismay and her hysterical attempt to find the shoes under the seat and make herself heard at the same time. But a turn in the road carried the travelers from sight, and left their late companion alone by the roadside, conscious of the amazed stares of Pedro and the stable boy. The motherly Maria meanwhile hovered between a smile of welcome and a frown of consternation at this apparition of the strange Señorita who had elected to honor their roof, and who wore the Indian shoes and laughed like a child when the bend in the road hid the stagecoach.

She felt so free again, so much her very own self! And she stretched out her arms with a great sigh of relief as she turned smilingly to the amazed Pedro.

It was a curious colloquy they held there in the open road. Pedro protesting, almost prostrating himself in his desire to impress her with the fact that his house was hers, his family at her disposal, he, himself, Pedro Lorde, at her feet; but——

And the Señorita, between her childish memories of Spanish and the Mexican's musical English, finally made him comprehend that she would accept of the hospitality of the Lorde establishment to the extent of a cup of coffee—if it was made quickly; and after that a saddle,—some sort, any sort of a saddle,—and a horse, or even a mule, if nothing better offered, that the Señorita might please herself by riding in the cool of the evening across the range to Hermosa.

In vain he protested that the horses of the stagecoach were tired—were not his to hire—were never used to feel any but the weight of the work harness on their backs. Maria was smiling at her husband's futile excuses, for the Señorita followed him to the stable, insisting, arguing, and laughing.

It was true that at first glance through the stable door only the work horses could be seen; but one gleam of a yellow mane, tossed impetuously in a far stall, made the girl clap her hands in laughing triumph.

" Ah—ha! You have it,—the saddle horse there! Yet you would see me walk so far, so far in the night? "

" But the Señor Leighton, if he should come and his horse be not there for the saddle? Ay—yi! if it should not be! " And a gesture of Pedro's expressive hands suggested nothing less than the instant annihilation of all concerned.

Leighton! Only one other name had she heard so often that day!

Leighton! The man who controlled the people as he chose, the man whom good luck followed! Leighton, who retained some sort of tenure on the estate of Hermosa, and who would make master and mistress of it listen to his dictation! The luck of this fine Señor Leighton whom she detested already! She would let him see she had some luck of her own!

" The Señor Leighton would not refuse the horse to a lady who visits the Hermosa, is it not so? " she demanded of the open eyed Maria. " Could a California gentleman refuse so slight a favor? "

There were further protests, followed by further arguments, and the final one was a coin pressed in Maria's hand—really the key of speech to her. For at once there was a torrent of expostulation in rapid Spanish for Pedro to bear up under, and energetic denunciation of his frantic appeals to the saints to defend him from the wrath to come if El Diablo was not safe back in the stable when the owner or the Señor Braith would stop for him two hours hence. And when the argument reached that stage the Señorita found a second coin in the little brown bag at her belt, and Pedro succumbed.

She got the horse and an old Mexican side-saddle from which many little leather tassels and knotted buckskin strings dangled.

The girl's eyes glowed dark with excitement. After all, the ending of her day was to be perfect! To ride alone in the dark across the ranges; to go her own gait and choose her own way—what joy there was in the prospect!

All the discords of the day were put aside. Of course they would thrust themselves forward again, and she would have to meet them just as she would have to meet the owner of the horse some day. But just now, this beautiful first night in California, she would choose her trail far from unpleasant thoughts!

So she recklessly decided while she drank the really good cup of coffee prepared by Maria and listened to the warning expostulations of Pedro and his assistant as they fastened the heavily flapped old saddle to El Diablo's unwilling back.

"A demon of a horse, Señorita, a demon out of hell, as you see!" he gasped, as he led the impatient animal into the yard. "Sandro has the bite from his teeth, and I have almost the kick from his foot. But he carry you, Señorita, sure! He carry you si you keep on his back!"

For one moment the girl hesitated as she saw what a really superb animal it was she had dared to confiscate. Only in pictures had she seen such a tawny coppery coat and such a silken mane and tail of silver. Memory brought to her a canvas in some Eastern gallery of art, a Moorish group in all the glow of Oriental contrast, with such a horse decked with jeweled trappings in the center of the picture. Some queen viewed some conquest from its back, while the horse looked more royal than the crowned woman. And the one led out for her use by Pedro looked like twin brother to the beauty of the picture.

With all her heart she envied the owner of the superb creature, yet for that one instant she hesitated.

"I think si you ride him, you so ver quick—no?" ventured Maria from the door where she had fled as the prancing, impatient animal whirled and protested at it unusual garnishings.

"And if the owner should come?" said the girl, with belated compunction. Had it been an ugly beast, she would have felt no qualm.

"I been think like that," stated Pedro, philosophical Pedro, now, with a coin safe in his pocket! "I been think maybe how Señor Leighton make the big damn row si I no give El Diablo to the Señorita si she ask. Me, I no am to blame si the stage no make the safe trip at all! That Creek cañon ver bad place. I maybe help save the soul from hell si I no send the Señorita by the stage. When Señor Leighton, he know all that, he no make the big row at all, not when he see the Señorita!"

The girl had been patting the neck of the horse, smoothing the silvery mane, making friends with him as she could, and giving little heed to Pedro's conviction that he possibly had kept her a little longer from the hades of the good Christian.

"Tell me the way," she said, slipping her hand caressingly along the creature's neck until she grasped the bridle.

"That beast, he know the way—El Diablo," said Pedro easily. He waved his hand across an open stretch of land where a faint cattle path was discernible for a few rods and then disappeared entirely. "It no is a road, but he go straight to find the slide by the creek—two mile, then you have good road, ver good. Little houses there—

many; big Hacienda over hill—by vineyard—no get dark yet at all. You see!"

She saw, and the next instant was in the saddle, striving under difficulties to adjust herself while El Diablo indulged in little cat jumps sideways as protests against the one-sided burden and the unaccustomed skirts.

Twice around the yard he indulged in this veritable devil's dance, while Pedro swore and Maria appealed to the Virgin, and the strange Señorita laughed, her eyes glowing with excitement.

Twice she let him have his own pleasure in his protest, which would have seemed vicious except for its beauty. But when the circle brought him again opposite the open gate and the praying Maria, she turned him with a quick firm hand toward the road and the range beyond.

"Now," she said, with a little lift of the bridle, a little touch of the moccasined heel; and then El Diablo, the beautiful, shot forward like a rocket. A moment later, the wind was whistling through the silky mane, and the girl felt her heart beat in harmony with the flying hoofs.

At last, at last she was having her longed for California home-coming!

IV

A RIDE WITH EL DIABLO.

Something of her own elation communicated itself to the horse after his first wondering spurt. He settled into an easy, contented gait, and ran for pure joy, while the girl laughed aloud, and bestowed upon him caressings and cajolings. The odor of the springing grass was in their nostrils, for the dews of the growing dusk diffused fragrance.

The sun had gone down, and the sky had faded from glowing crimson to the opalescent tints of twilight. Far to the south there was yet a band of yellow along the horizon, and high above and straight ahead shone one star and the golden sickle of the new moon.

Some verses she had read somewhere came singing in her ears, keeping time to the hoof beats, and she sang them joyously as she rode.

They had covered two miles, and Diablo had settled into a long swinging lope. The girl had chanted the verses to the swing of his stride, and from that slightly monotonous repetition, she broke into a tilting love song ringing clear and high over the rolling uplands.

El Diablo pricked up his ears in amazement at this new kind of rider, and then, evidently approving, tossed his beautiful head and forged onward toward the scrubby growth marking the edge of the field and the descent of the creek road below.

But in the midst of the song his ears suddenly pointed meaningly, and he sent a loud whinny in response to some sound ahead.

Quickly the girl tightened the grip on the bridle and peered ahead, for he plainly expressed a desire to break into a run. Straight ahead was a declivity, she could not see how deep or how steep, but she could guess at its width, for the opposite wall loomed up against the sky line, a dark chaparral covered bank.

She brought Diablo, champing and impatient, to a standstill, while she strove to see ahead in the gathering dusk.

Yes; there was a cattle path standing along the bluff, the "slide" mentioned by Pedro, and beyond she could hear the gurgle of water. Below there somewhere was the road by which she would pass the clustered homes of the workmen, and farther on the show house of the section, the Hacienda of Hermosa.

A sound like the echo of Diablo's hoof-beats came to her for an instant as she halted, but when she listened more intently she could hear only the drumming of her own heart, the deep breathing of the horse, and far up the cañon the sound of wind among trees.

"It's nothing, Diablo," she said, straightening from her scrutiny of the ground ahead; "but you must slow up, old boy, or your shoes will be skates.—What's that?"

From across the ravine mingled sounds came to her, ominous, threatening! The striking of iron on shelving rock, the crashing of stone loosened and tearing its way down a declivity, the thud as it struck the boles of trees in its course, and the splash as it struck the water below! The almost human scream of a horse and the oath of a man deepened the horror for a moment, and then there was silence, except for the little rustle of the loosened gravel.

On the brink of the incline she held Diablo, who was quivering with terror of something! She tried to call, and could not. As her joy had lent him wings, so now did his terror paralyze her so effectually that twice she opened her lips to call, and each time they closed in silence.

It was not really the half of a minute, but it seemed hours before the sound of the man's voice came to her again,—breathless, frenzied, yet with a note of exhaustion in it.

"Galbraith! For Christ's sake, Galbraith, the dam!"

The man had seen the horse outlined clearly against the dusk, and had appealed to the supposed rider.

"Wait," called the girl, as Diablo plunged downward in the dusk.

"A woman! My God! Go back! Go back, I tell you!"

"I guess not," she retorted, and the rest of his warning was drowned by the crash of her own progress down the slope, for El Diablo put his feet together and slid where the incline was too steep for hurried steps.

They landed on the wagon road below. Close beside it was the creek and on trestles, high above and hugging the opposite wall, was a dark dripping flume, stretching into the dusk each way until it suggested an immense snake winding its way along the cañon.

In the road where he had dragged himself through the water, was a man leaning against a huge boulder, and down his cheek a dark stain spread.

He lurched forward, reaching out a warning hand, and she noticed even in her excitement, that one foot was dragged painfully as he tried to walk.

"Go back! I thought it was Galbraith when I called. Nothing can save them now. I tried the short cut, but my horse went down, his leg broken. No use trying! Get to the high ground—

quick—quick! Don't you understand?" he demanded roughly, as she stared at him in amazement. "Don't you hear it?" And he pointed up the cañon, where she could hear only the swelling sound of wind in the trees, growing louder and louder. "It's the dam! I tried to warn them"—and he made a despairing gesture down stream. "I can't make it now, and they'll go under. Oh my God! they'll go under!"

He was fairly sobbing at his own impotence, and the girl recoiled under the shock of his grief. Yet on the instant she leaned forward and closed her fingers tightly on his shoulder.

"The dam! You mean the Darrett dam? Phil Darrett's work!"

"The Darrett dam? Yes! God! If cursing his soul into hell this night could save the other poor devils! Do you hear it? That water is grinding into bed rock the curse of Darrett's name in this valley!"

The girl's face could not have been whiter, and she gave a little cry as she wrested the horse free from his restraining hand.

"We'll see!" she called grimly. "Make the bluff if you can! I'm going this way!"

"It's death to you!" cried the man, wildly striving to get to her. But she held up her hand and motioned him to the bluff.

"It's death to them if I don't make it!" she answered, and the next instant El Diablo, frantic with terror, was running like mad as the herald of that roaring, grinding, unseen horror of the Hermosa cañon.

The man uttered a cry of protest and then "Good-bye—God bless you!" he called.

But she made no reply. She wanted none of his blessings. He had cursed the Darrett name, and she had listened in silence, as she had listened all day. Words were of no use if what they said was true. But now, now she would show them what a Darrett could do to atone!

"Oh Dad, Dad! Come with me! Come with me!" she moaned as she leaned low in the saddle. And the trees and rocks and turns in the road sped past them like a dusky panorama of moving things, though her own speed appeared all too slow. "Good horse—good horse!—for Dad's sake, for the lives down there—for the Darrett name—oh, Diablo, hurry—hurry—hurry!"

And El Diablo deserved his name in that race with death, for it was like a devil he ran, and nothing more earthly. The girl's hair, from which the hat had flown, was flecked with foam as she leaned low on his neck, and his silvery mane, mingling with her own loosened tresses, streamed and whistled in the wind. In the wild exultation of her intended victory, even the danger was deadened for a time. All the West, the ideal West, of her dreams, was in her heart and her blood as she swept through the death trap of the dark cañon. Then a light twinkled ahead—another—and another! She had reached the houses of the workmen! Her voice sounded in her own ears strange and high and far off as she screamed to the people where the lights were.

A door opened and the workmen saw a foam-covered horse dash past, and a girl bent low on his neck who turned brilliant eyes and a white face toward them as she called: "Run!—Run for your lives!—The dam has broken!" and then vanished around the bend, where other lights twinkled, and her high clear tones cut through the dusk as the message was repeated again and again to the startled listeners who, with prayers, curses and tears, broke for the bluff like stampeding cattle, as that distant rumbling, like imprisoned thunder, followed in the wake of the strange rider.

A group of men at a blacksmith's shop checked their talk as the flying hoofs came nearer and the scream of a girl sounded in their ears. A few stepped back out of the path of the supposed runaway. One man standing beside his horse, on which a shoe had just been fitted, leaped forward with the instinct of help; but lifting her hand, she motioned him back, and called her warning.

"The dam! The girl is right, hear it!" And the man who had meant to stop her, swung himself into his saddle.

" Let the horse go! Break for the hill with us, Señor!" called one of the men. " You can't outrun that!"

" What about the girl?" retorted the other; and his horse gave a mighty leap under the spur, and then two riders, instead of one, dashed ahead of that wall of water sweeping ruin in its way.

He knew, as the girl did not, that the greatest point of danger was not where the workmen,—the wifeless fellows,—shantied, close to the bluff, but on ahead where the gulch widened and where the old adobe homes of the Mexicans were,—the farmers, the cattle men and the workers of the vineyards. There they lived with their wives and their children in the dwellings, where many of their forefathers had lived long before the new people had come to the land and roiled the waters of the harmless arroya where the women washed the clothes and the children played.

Behind him the sullen roar was changing its character. Even above the thud of flying hoofs he could hear the crash, crash of snapping timbers as the flume was struck, and the scattering of boulders tossed by the flood upon the solid rocks of the cañon's wall. Ahead of him he could hear the calls of the girl,—she had reached the cabins!

She was in time to warn,—would he be in time to help?

Around the bend of the road he dashed, his horse as wild as the human beings in fear of the thunderous enemy gaining, steadily gaining!

In the light of open doors he could see figures fleeing to the left where the bluff was highest. Some screamed, others were silently active, one laughed wildly as she clutched two children and dragged them to the bluff.

And in the middle of the road stood El Diablo with a crone-like figure hanging to his bridle screaming in Spanish some plea the girl could not comprehend. But she could comprehend the danger and she leaned forward trying to drag the crazed old creature up behind her, while El Diablo fought for his freedom and showed a plain desire to ride over all obstacles.

But the old woman refused to be helped, and breaking away, she staggered, screaming, " Back into the little adobe beside the road! "

The man caught the girl by the arm and pointed ahead and to the left.

" Quick—around that point and to the top of the plateau; then ride, ride! You have a half minute to make it! "

The girl stared at him astounded; until his horse had ranged side by side with hers and his hand had touched her, she had been ignorant of his presence there. She nodded comprehendingly and then turned her eyes toward the old woman, who was running from the door with a tiny bundle.

"Lift her behind me!" she entreated, turning to the man.—"Oh, it is a child—do—I beg of you—do!"

"Señor!" screamed the old woman "for the love of God, Señor! Carmenita — the little mother!"

"Carmenita!"

He swung out of the saddle as he spoke, lifted the child into the girl's outstretched hands, and set the little old woman behind her on El Diablo, who pranced dangerously until the man spoke to him words of command in Spanish.

"To your left—to your left—for your lives!" he shouted, and the horse leaped forward under its triple burden.

Two steps took him to the door of the dwelling. A white faced girl stared at him with wide, black eyes of terror from the low bed in the corner.

"Señor — Señor Braith — have pity," she moaned, and reached out pleading arms to him.

As he had taken the babe, so he lifted the mother, wrapped as she was in the patchwork quilt. An instant more and he was again in the saddle and his powerful animal leaped forward as the first adobe was struck by the moving wall of water, rearing its averted head like a serpent trailing its path of death between the hills.

One scream—the scream of a woman in mortal terror—came back to him as his horse plunged up the steep hill to the left, steep enough and high enough for safety if El Diablo had taken it quickly enough, if the girl rider had known the land and had made no detour in the uncertain dark.

Even as he thought of the chances against her, his own horse was struck. Its hind quarters sank suddenly as if its back had been broken. A shrill cry of agony from the brute, a leap of the rider from the saddle forward and upward, and the next moment both were caught and tossed like straws on the roaring waters.

V

IN THE TRACK OF THE FLOOD.

Two hours later, one of the men who had been of the group at the blacksmith's shop, found El Diablo cropping the new grass of the plateau, his satiny coat splashed by the clay colored water of the ravine, his silvery mane and tail silvery no longer. But with the excepting such tarnished glories, he appeared not at all damaged by the enemy he had barely escaped.

"It was not a spirit then," said the Mexicans, crossing themselves. "It was truly El Diablo—a living animal that made the run to save us all! But who rode him? What living woman has ever been on the back of El Diablo?"

The men who had not seen the flood and its herald did not believe in the strange unknown rider. Where could she have come from? Who had ever before seen such a girl in that valley?

No one had,—that was quite true. And the women gathering their children about them (not one had been lost in that war of waters) prayed each to her own patron saint. And for that awful night and many a day after, their special guardian angel was photographed on their mental vision as a creature of blazing eyes, commanding voice, and dark hair streaming on the wind.

Then a shout was heard down the ravine, and the men who had gathered with the women around a bonfire waiting for the night to pass, seized flaming brands and following the voice, found a man kneeling beside a woman's figure, deathlike in its stillness. A smiling infant was bound tightly across her bosom by the Mexican scarf knotted at the back—the last act of the little brown old woman who had been lifted behind the girl on El Diablo.

A nasty cut under the curls of the forehead had soaked them with blood and the man beside her uttered an exclamation of relief as the light of the torches showed him her face.

" She is alive—it bleeds! Help me with her some of you! "

It was the man who had called a blessing after her in the cañon.

" Señor Leighton! You have been in the flood! You have been hurt? "

" Not much. I dragged myself across somehow. I knew this was the only place she could get out of the cañon if she got out alive at all. I started to warn you all, but my horse went down at the cut-off, and she,—she took up the work where I laid it down."

The men carried her to the fire while the man who had found her, with the help of the men, hobbled slowly after. His ankle was dislocated and badly swollen. Under his directions one of the men removed the shoe and pulled the bone into place with rough surgery.

The girl was unconscious, yet breathing. She was but slightly wet, for only the spray of the flood had touched her. Some missile flung by the torrent had struck her, or the older woman, falling, had dragged her down. But she was there,—a living, breathing creature, and no phantasm bred by fear in the minds of the people who gathered about her, wondering, awestruck.

" It is the manta of old Carolina Alverez," said the women as they undid the scarf, and one of them, who had a babe of her own, took the child and stilled its cries with motherly attention.

" It is the babe of Carmenita, Carmenita Alverez, who could never escape—never! She has gone down in the flood! " And the women whispered together and crossed themselves, and looked askance at the still figure of the girl by the fire.

" Her so white, her dress all so fine,—a fine Señorita; yet on her feet are shoes like an Indian. A Señorita who wears moccasins! "

" She rode El Diablo, she is perhaps some visitor to the Old Mission," ventured another. But the master of the mission rancho heard them and denied it.

"I can't account for her having the horse. Galbraith rode him yesterday," he said. "More than likely it is some guest from the Hacienda. If so, we must take her there."

"Don Mac," said one of the older women hesitatingly, "the Doña Delfina is not at home; only Don Felipe is there with only some men friends."

"Then she must go to the mission," said Leighton, curtly. "Tia Perenza will nurse her well—take her to my house."

And so it was that she was carried in a hammock made of coats, slowly, slowly over the range she had crossed so gaily at sunset, carried to the home of the man whom she had disliked without ever having seen him, the man who had "the luck" and whose luck had brought him back to the Hermosa valley when it needed him most.

He looked at the group of huddling women, shelterless in the open field, and remembered things the sight of the girl had made him forget.

"At your service, ladies—señores. It is as near to the old mission as it is to the settlement. There are roofs for all of you and food as well. Mr. Galbraith will see to your comfort."

"Ay, in Paradise!" cried one of the older women,—"the men say he is gone down in the flood!"

"In the flood!—Galbraith!"

"He followed the Señorita; no one ever saw him again."

"Ay! He is gone! And Carolina Alverez and Carmenita,—all gone, señor,—carried down in the flood of the thrice accursed Darrett dam!"

"Carmenita and Galbraith! What a night's work! what a night's work!"

He sat silent in the firelight, his face covered with his hands, and the people grew still, remembering that the friendship of their Don Mac and his overseer had been long and close. They respected his silent grief, yet there was no little curiosity in the glances directed toward him in the flickering light of the bonfire.

For a year this Don Mac had not set foot on this, his own land of the Hermosa, and none of them had forgotten that his wedding day with Doña Delfina Gonzales had been long settled, and that it was her elopement with Señor Darrett had sent him for change of scene, or thought, or work, to some long ignored mines of Mexico.

It was perhaps because he was so very much American and so very, very little Spanish—only a great-grandmother had been of that volatile blood—that he had neither fought with his rival, nor drunk himself mad with brandy for a month after the wedding.

But he had not; he had only laughed and taken his freedom joyously.

He had been the first to welcome the elopers home. He had been prompt to adjust the affairs of the Gonzales estate that the young lovers should have only a path of roses to tread. No one had seen anything but content on his strong, almost handsome face, with the dark eyes of his Spanish ancestress, and, where the thick tan did not hide it, the fairer complexion of the many American forbears.

The people, watching him while waiting for the mission horses and lanterns he had sent after, were glad in their hearts that he had come back. The good God had sent him against their need. But he had gone away smiling and he had come back to them sad and troubled, all the light gone from his face. To look at him one could believe that the years had been many and long instead of one brief summer and winter.

When the men and horses arrived, he got the women and children started for the old mission, after which he was helped into the saddle; but instead of accompanying them, he turned to the men.

" I can't walk, but I can ride with you," he said. " All of you come who can."

" But where, señor? " asked one of the Mexicans.

" To cover every rod of land touched by the flood until we find Galbraith."

"But you, señor—with the hurt——"

"When I can't sit in the saddle you will have to help me, or I can crawl, as I did to her."

"But your foot! The doctor is sent for, he will be at the Mission rancho, señor, and then——"

"Then he can wait and the foot will keep. Joe Galbraith can't have gone under when that girl with the child outrode it! He is hurt somewhere,—waiting for me to come,—I know it as well as if I saw him! It's no sort of use to tell me anything about it," he continued, as each and all of them strove to assure him how safely he might leave the search to them. "I know you'll all do your work, but I've got mine to do. If it was Mac Leighton stranded somewhere in that wreckage, would Joe Galbraith lie back on cushions and wait for some one else to make reports? —Hardly!"

The night was dark, the search slow and dreary work, and dawn was breaking over the mother mountains when they found him in a bunch of chaparral wedged against a gnarled tree trunk. Across his breast, clasped in his arm, was the dead body of Carmenita, and both were pinned down by a heavy timber from the shattered flume.

The Mexicans stared strangely at each other at the sight of the two thus in the light of the gray dawn. Only yesterday he had quarreled with Señor Darrett for her sake, had uttered threats and oaths that were nasty to hear. And it was for her, for her that he had ridden like a madman into danger—and arrived too late!

Leighton noted their glances and swore softly to himself.

"Lift the timber—easy there, Diego. So! Give her to me—yes to me!" he repeated, in response to their questioning stare. "A sprained ankle doesn't cripple a man all over! Now see to him—quick! Lift him out of that! Breath in him? I told you there would be! Who has some whisky?"

No one had. The last little drop in Diego's flask had been poured between the pale lips of the strange Señorita of the moccasins.

"He is deathly cold," said Leighton, leaning from the saddle to touch his friend's face. "Here, put my coat around him; keep moving now till we get to the rancho. Easy boys, go easy! That timber was no light weight, but it struck her first,—poor Carmenita!"

As they went slowly homeward through the fresh faint glow of the coming day, he stared down strangely at the white face and the closed eyes of the dead girl. All her short life he had known her. Once, not so long ago, he remembered sending her a string of coral at Christmas and she had run barefooted across the field to the mission rancho to shower her childish thanks on him,—the pretty, impulsive, kindly child! And then in ways of stealth some other had brought her corals—or their equivalents—and Carmenita was no longer a child! A sparkling defiance was hers, which even the oldest friend could not question. A little tigress she had been, seeking her mate in the chaparral. And now her day was done and it was her old friend who carried her home to rest.

He only hoped that death had come to her quickly, painlessly, but knowing all, he could scarcely wish her alive again. He felt that even if living, the beauty and sparkle and faith of life had been killed in her; and Carmenita was not a creature for half tones, and twilight tints, but rather a brilliant poppy flaunting its petals for a brief day by the wayside.

Sometimes in the words of the men ahead, he could hear the oft recurring subject of the other girl, the Señorita of the moccasins. She was the real savior of their awful night. Prayers were said and candles vowed for her as they moved slowly onward with their burden in the dawning.

Leighton smiled grimly as he heard them. All Galbraith did, all he had tried to do, had dwindled into nothing beside the heroism of the unknown girl who had won the admiration of them all. The mystery of her alone exerted a strong influence upon their varied imaginations,—like nothing born of woman-kind had she appeared to them. He saw one of the more devout cross himself when he spoke of her.

His memory of her did not exactly suggest the angelic. She had seemed a very good running mate for El Diablo as she had stared frowning at him, in the cañon, as she had flung aside his detaining hand, as she had flung back some defiance at him even while she had plunged ahead of that horror to do his work,—the haunting, mocking, daring Señorita,—"Señorita of the Moccasins," as the Mexicans had already named her.

VI

THE OLD MISSION OF HERMOSA.

The Old Mission of Hermosa was for some reason no longer known by that name since the magnificent Hacienda of Hermosa had been built by the Gonzales across the valley. It was only "Old Mission" now, a series of rambling houses clustered about the half ruined old chapel where the doves perched on the timbers of the old belfry and circled above the palms and old olive trees around the garden. But to the site of the Old Mission dwellings only did the name really belong. Beautiful it was with its vine covered hills reaching high to the east, its garden hedges of oleander and pomegranate, and beyond all its wide range where the horses were,—for so far as business on the rancho was concerned, that business was horses. Fortunately the old gardens were given up to the colts and there was enough space retained by the vines and orchard to yet suggest something of the old pastoral peace of the place that was once a sanctuary.

When Leighton was a mere lad running about in the hot sand with Diego and Pedro and the others, his father—or his mother—had owned the entire Hermosa tract. He was too small to remember much about the great change by which it was swept out of their possession. Old California grants were proven defective. His father ill with his last sickness, his mother heedless and helpless, caring only for the life fading away beside her,—that was the confused picture left on his childish mind. Then he remembered Tia Perenza crying over him as he was being prepared for a long journey, and then long boyish years in Mexico where his mother had gone to the home of a widowed sister. Only a remnant had been left of their once wide possessions. All had been turned into coin by which the boy was given such education as it would allow, while his mother, patient and uncomplaining, vainly tried to enter into the new life with her son. Her eyes and thoughts were turned to the sun-kissed slopes where her love-life had been lived and her son born.

As he grew older, he comprehended something of her pride and her longing for her native land, and he made wild promises, as youth will, of the fortune he would make when he was a man, and with which he would buy back for her the entire Hermosa. But she had died before his school days were ended, and it was only her picture he brought back, when years later the sudden fancy of a suddenly rich old Mexican, Manuel Gonzales, prompted him to develop a mine in which for a time all his hopes and dollars were sunk. But after a season of feverish weeks and months, the boyish dreams were in a measure realized. Hermosa had been divided and had changed owners several times since he played around the fountain in the old patio, but that portion which contained the historic old buildings and the magnificent viaduct, he was able to secure. The balance was purchased by Gonzales, who had come with him for a holiday and who caught the California fever and determined to build a palace under the old pepper trees, and be a neighbor to the young fellow he coveted as a son. It was not exactly a palace, but it was by far the finest structure in the county, though left incomplete at the time of his death. The management of the estate and the guardianship of his daughter, he had left to Mac Leighton and died content with the assurance that Delfina would marry Mac in good time and that the boy's dream of joining the estates would come true.

None of the owners of the Old Mission had done aught during those years to perpetuate the growths planted so devoutly by the workers of St. Francis. But, luckily, none of the new people had been of the revolutionary sort; if they had not planted or pruned neither had they uprooted, and the old trees lingered where they would under the easy rule of " Don Mac " and the heedless rule of the Señor Braith, who had someway belonged to the Mexican days—and who was known at the rancho as the very right hand of the owner, trusted, drunk or sober, year in and year out. For ten years they had been " partners " in that fashion. Leighton had scarcely been twenty-one when they met—and Galbraith only a couple of years older.

But for Galbraith, who was entirely American, or at least had none of the Latin drops in his blood, the Californias had never the same feeling that they had for their Don Mac, whose ancestors had ridden the ranges before they were even turned by the plow. Galbraith was as " square," as reliable where his word was once given, but his life had been harder; he had cherished fewer illusions. He was recklessly outspoken where diplomacy would have served him better. To be sure, the natives could not really cheat Leighton any more easily out of the calf or the colt, or the day's work; but Leighton would let the Mexican or the Anglo-Saxon depart in peace with the comfortable feeling that no one had guessed his desire to cheat, while Galbraith would clinch them in the act, curse them soundly and send them away angered and sullen, and promising him a knife some dark night.

The household, itself, so far as the housekeeping went, was under the hawk-like eyes of Esperenza Moro, whose black handkerchiefed head held memories of days when she was only one of many maidens who came from the adobes to the Mission for teachings temporal and spiritual. Most of these gave place in a few summers to other maidens preparing for the same sort of mental activity, that was required to stew beans, mend clothes, and plant the gardens in season. But Perenza was one of the few who never gave way to make room for a newer face. She was the landmark past which her mates traveled to matrimony and the lives echoing the lives of their mothers in the squat little cabins. Even the last of the padres had she seen take the trail to the sea. And to the severity of her discipline it was due, no doubt, that the coming of the crippled, the helpless, and the dead of the Quartz creek flood made no special commotion in the rooms of the Old Mission. Everything was in order. A whole village for breakfast only meant the large kettles instead of the small ones. Perenza boasted of having filled cups and plates when a hundred at a time sat in the refectory. They should see, these young people, how it was done.

Carmenita lay in the sala. The child was unhurt, but the doctor shook his head over the wound in the young girl's skull and said little. Leighton's injured ankle did not prevent him from insisting that he and no other should nurse Galbraith, who was "coming around" with growls and vague mutterings of " Greaser—the damned Greaser " and occasionally a reiterated call for " Carmenita !—Carmenita !—Carmenita ! "

Noticing the questioning light in Dr. Elroy's eyes and the open curiosity of the Mexicans, he got rid of them as quickly as possible. Galbraith was black and blue, two of his ribs were broken, his shoulder cut, a slit sewed up back of his ear; but Leighton treated these things lightly and laid the blame of the patient's boisterousness on the opiate the doctor had given him.

" That stuff won't quiet Joe," he insisted. " He is naturally quiet, but with a dozen or so beyond his allowance, he acts something like this. He is not delirious. Your powders have only given him a new kind of drunk. Leave him to me and you go and look after Miss Moccasins."

" Miss——? "

" Oh, you know,—the girl who made the ride, the Señorita they are all saying prayers for. You look after her; I'll attend to Galbraith."

But his attentions when the door was closed were to inspect Galbraith carefully to decide how he might take hold of him vigorously without special danger to the injured parts, and then he proceeded deliberately to shake him each time Galbraith began his cries culminating in calls for Carmenita.

" It's a puzzle all around," decided Leighton, leaning back in the chair and resting after much exertion. " He never used to care for the girl that I could see, never noticed her more than, or even so much as the other girls of the valley. But he calls me back here on a double quick to help straighten the tangles of Hermosa, and she was one of them. I thought it was the dickering with the water rights woke him up, but perhaps—perhaps I am the fool!——"

He scowled at the flushed unconscious face on the pillow and brought his clenched hand down emphatically on the arm of the chair.

" It won't do, old man—it won't do! " he muttered. " You'll have enough work to help straighten out affairs here without carrying extra weights, and those loitering Mexicans will do you no good. Sorry to disturb you," he added as the calls began again, " but——"

He interrupted himself by gripping the unconscious man by the unhurt arm and shaking him vigorously, but the only result was a wordless yell.

" That's better; yell till you raise the tiles, but don't talk," said his nurse. " It's the wrong time, old man, it's the wrong time."

After a third vigorous shaking the invalid opened his eyes drowsily, yet with a gleam of recognition in them.

"H'lo Mac!" he muttered. "What's up? what's——"

"You are," said Mac promptly. "You've had a drunk on powders or pills and you're just coming around. Want some whisky?"

"I reckon so," was the drowsy response. "What d'ye think I'd call for,—a coffin?"

Leighton smiled grimly. "Now you are natural," he remarked. "I told Dr. Elroy it was only a plain drunk he gave you. He is all right for broken bones, but I can discount him as nurse. Listen to me: You're awake, aren't you? Well, you keep awake long enough to understand just one thing. Listening?"

Galbraith nodded.

"You've been calling one name—over and over; stop it! Keep awake! Don't swallow any more dopy stuff, do you hear?"

"Yes, I reckon."

"It's—Carmenita, you know—the little girl who——"

"I know," interrupted Galbraith, aroused by the name. "Carmenita—I saved her—didn't I—Mac? didn't I?" he repeated as the other hesitated.

"Oh yes—yes—you saved her," affirmed Leighton hurriedly. "Don't you worry about that; but don't talk about her either sleeping or waking. You've been yelling her name, and Darrett's too, to beat the band. You cursed him enough yesterday without taking time for it to-day, and if you break loose again I'll just about shake your molars loose."

Doctor Elroy reached the door in time to hear this threat of the nurse, and remonstrated accordingly.

"That's all right, doctor," returned Leighton easily, "I've shaken him awake and into his senses, and if he falls from grace, I'll have to do it again. I've been in Mexico for a year and he has been backsliding in consequence; his language was beyond any sort of pardon."

"I meant him to sleep——" began the doctor.

"And that's what he wouldn't do. Speak up, Braith; tell him whisky always wakes you up instead of putting you to sleep, and the opiate did the same."

"He's right," articulated Galbraith, drowsily. "I'm awake—don't bother him. Mac always does my thinking for me when I'm not able."

"I am gratified that you are coming around so quickly," said the doctor, drawing on his driving gloves. "I'll be back this evening. I'm not just exactly hopeful over the condition of the young lady."

"Carmenita?" asked Galbraith, aroused from his lethargy by the memory of the night before;

"You told me, Mac,—you told me Carmenita ——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Leighton with a warning glance at Dr. Elroy, "Carmenita is—is safe. It's the other girl he means, the stranger who gave the warning, the girl who rode El Diablo."

"Good God,—yes!" breathed Galbraith, sinking back. "Then she was there! I thought that was a dream!"

"You know who she is?" demanded Leighton, "you remember her?"

"Remember! How could I forget her?" he muttered. "And is she hurt—hurt bad?"

"Not fatally I hope," added the doctor cautiously.

"And I thought she was part of a dream—a dream!" he murmured drowsily. Then his eyes closed, his breathing grew regular and deep, and the doctor watching him nodded approvingly.

"He will come around all right. I wish I was as sure of the girl. You had better send word to her relatives at once. She has had an ugly wound on her head. Both speech and memory may be a long time coming back—if ever they come!"

Leighton sat a long time by the door of Galbraith's room staring across the patio and thinking of the doctor's parting words.

That beautiful, daring, defiant creature who might never waken to remembrance, and all through doing his work—his!

Diego Estrada approached from the corrals but halted, hesitating, as he noticed Leighton's preoccupation. Mac's face was so sombre that one would have fancied him asleep. But at the halting step he looked up.

"A bad night's work, Diego!"

"Ay, Don Mac—very bad! The men have found Carolina Alverez."

Leighton looked the question he would have asked, and Diego shook his head.

"Dead, señor. The men did what they could, but the water had carried her far. It is as well the women do not see her; there is nothing they can do.—God's curse on the work of Felipe Darrett!"

"The curse is working hard enough, but it is working the wrong way, Diego."

"That is so, señor." Estrada hesitated a moment, and then continued, "I see how you shut the door on the boys who listen, Don Mac, and we all hearing how Señor Braith is as mad in his sleep as he was yesterday in the road when he met with Felipe Darrett and swore how he will kill him,—pretty much the same. But señor, you have been a year in Mexico and many things happen and Señor Braith was only saying what many a man thought. We,—I was very glad to hear him saying it like that to Felipe Darrett's face,—Carmenita—God rest her soul!—was like a little sister to my children."

"Where were you to hear anything?" demanded Leighton, frowning.

"Pepe and Sanchez and me, we going across by the old flume at the big bend, and we hear it all—every word. When Señor Braith swore he shoot his damn head off si he is ever again inside the Alverez home, Pete and me we hoping he do it then, but maybe he not having any gun."

Leighton sat frowning at the paving stones of the outer court and Estrada, perceiving that the subject was unpleasant, changed it instantly.

"It is for the grave I came to speak with you, señor. Carmenita and the grandmother, they living all alone—no relatives anywhere. The poor board—perhaps——"

"No," said Leighton, suddenly alert, "the mother of his child shall rest in the new Hermosa cemetery. Their deaths lay at Darrett's door and the dead shall be buried there."

"But if Señor Darrett objects—or the señora ——"

"He will not object," returned Leighton. "These people were killed by the Hermosa mismanagement; why should not Señora Darrett give them grave room?"

"That is true," agreed Estrada, "and it is well. If Carmenita had been asked she would have said to take her there, perhaps."

"Perhaps," said Leighton, briefly. "You see to it."

"And Father Rey?"

"Send him to me when he comes."

"Buena!" said Estrada, approvingly. "All our people very glad you come back again to take hold."

He had crossed the patio when Leighton called him back.

"Was it you spoke of Señor Braith leaving Diablo at Pedro's yesterday?"

"Sure! El Diablo was to have the shoes changed, but he acted like a fiend out of hell; and Señor Braith could not wait so long, so he just send him to Pedro's stable till he is coming home again."

"Very good.—Go you and ask Pedro who took the horse from there."

"Why," and Estradá made a gesture down the corridor,—"the Señorita."

"What Señorita? Where did she come from?"

"Nobody knowing that, Don Mac."

"Find out!"

"The people, nearly all, think the good God he sent her."

" But he would not have sent her on El Diablo! —See Pedro."

The day was yet early, and as the refugees from the wrecked valley came out from the bountiful breakfast in the refectory, the mothers and fathers came forward to shake hands with the master, who had come back. Some of the older people prayed for a little corner of the Mission, where they could end their days, for the land of the Gonzales was accursed. The younger ones asked for work, and many of the mothers led forward their children that the tawny little tots might know the face of Don Mac, who was sheltering them and feeding them.

On every side there was the echo of Estrada's words. They were glad, the old and the young alike, that he was again among them. They were like children in their absolute faith that all would be well in the valley once more. There would be work for all, that the clothes and food might be bought. The ranchos would share the life of the old days. The natives would be given first place in the ranges and vineyards, while the thrice accursed foreign emigrant, with his brogue and his strange ways, would be sent back to the railroad! All would come right when their Don Mac was there to help them!

He listened and felt ashamed of the many, many days when he had forgotten them and their needs. He had never realized that he was more necessary than others in the Hermosa valley,—perhaps the natives never realized it themselves until he had left them for that year, and the season of Darrett's mastery had brought to them a dread of the new and the strange until the name of Don Mac was a part of their prayers.

Their God and the saints were all very well for the things of the spirit, and the life afar off, but it was the living prescnce of McNeil Leighton upon which they depended for managing the mundane affairs of the Hermosa valley.

Old Perenza came hobbling out to him on the porch, her keen, jealous eyes snapping with satisfaction as the outsiders moved aside, showing her the respect exacted by her from the toilers of the valley.

" The Señorita, she asking for the child; it is all what she talks," she stated briefly.

Leighton looked from one to the other of the women questioningly. He knew no more than Perenza, whose hands had taken the child; all his thoughts had been for the girl who had ridden his favorite horse and flung back defiance at him.

But a young woman came forward with a tiny mantilla-wrapped bundle.

" I took it, señor. My Pablo is old enough to wean, and if this little one could take his place——"

"You are Anita, Juan's Anita?" said Leighton. "Very good! Go with Tia Perenza. Do whatever she tells you." Then he addressed himself to the latter. "The Señorita speaks, then? The doctor feared she might not. I may see her?"

"Aye, you can look with the eyes, but you no get her to talk with the sense,—maybe not at all. All same, you come along si you like."

Leighton arose and followed her, glad to escape from the eager thanks of the people, and the old woman made a chuckling sound allied to laughter. She was well pleased to think that he disdained the thanks of the common people. She had a pride in dispensing charity to them, but she liked it to descend upon them as from an eminence.

The Señorita lay in a closet-like cell of many forgotten padres,—the only form of sleeping room known on the Mission rancho. Its one tiny window opened on the garden, and the fragrance of jasmine drifted through the narrow aperture and met Leighton in the doorway.

The white bandage about the girl's head made more vivid the deep flush of her cheeks. A coarse white gown had replaced the trim traveling dress, and around her throat the string of turquoise shone on its thread of sinew, fastened by the cord of scarlet.

Beautiful as she had appeared to Leighton in the dusk of the cañon, or even in her pallid helplessness of the early dawn, she had not appealed to him as she did now in her flushed, unconscious loveliness under his own roof. As she turned her head restlessly on Esperenza's finest lace-trimmed pillow and flung out her arm, bare and white, where the sleeve slipped aside, he felt to blame as he stared at her, a figure in flushed marble carved from the white austerity of a monk's cell. Yet the fascination the picture held for him could no more have been explained than could the leap of his heart when out of her restless silence he heard her voice again, the voice he had followed through the gloom of the night, and which all the horrors of that torrent had failed to drown in his ears.

"It is a child—a little child!" she murmured insistingly. "Give it to me—oh—please—please!"

Her hands were reached out appealingly, and then fell back weakly beside her, while she whimpered like a child deprived of a toy.

"It is all she speaks, señor—not one other thing," stated Perenza. "We—I think it maybe is that muchachito—so I go for him."

"A little child," repeated the girl drowsily.

Leighton hobbled across to the cot and clasped her wrist.

"Whose child—whose is it?" he asked in an authoritative manner, and the sharp, decisive tones penetrated her dulled consciousness and for a moment the gray eyes opened full upon him and her reply had a slightly surprised tone.

"Why, the child from the cabin, the last cabin. I wish they would bring him. I am so tired alone—so tired—I wish—" and then her wishes drifted into indistinct murmurs, and fretful unconscious appeals.

"Put the child, some child beside her," said Leighton. "Give her anything she asks for, anything to keep her from fretting or restlessness!"

"The doctor—he thinking she maybe not talk at all," said the old woman, reassuringly. "This is not so bad like he think."

"Perhaps not," said Leighton, as he dragged his injured foot back into the sunshine of the court. "But she did my work, Perenza. The Mission rancho and all it holds is for her service; see that no one forgets it."

Old Perenza nodded her head and looked at him sharply from under her shaggy brows. He had always been thoughtful of people, had Don Mac, but his special care for the Señorita wakened a brief hope in her old heart. She had wished with all the might that was in her that he would come back from Mexico with some wife beautiful as the day, richer than a dozen of the Gonzales. Don Mac might laugh and be gay if he chose over the elopement of his fiancee with another man, but in Perenza the slight rankled like a poisoned arrow. Suppose the girl in the cell of the old padres should heal that wound to the pride! To Perenza she was more beautiful than the Gonzales, and when had he ever looked at the heir of Hermosa as he looked at the Señorita of the moccasins?

The old woman took her knitting to the door of the little room and sat in the shade of the wide porch, glancing occasionally to the far end, where Leighton resumed his place at Galbraith's door. Her dreams had ever been of a wife of wealth for him, but after all beauty and youth were better than nothing!

Diego Estrada returned in a little while, and beside him was the much frightened Pedro, who hastened to assure Don Mac how little he was to blame in the matter of El Diablo! Maria herself was witness that it was little else than highway robbery the strange Señorita had been guilty of. That one horse she would have and no other. And he, Pedro Lorde, and also Maria, had been so sure she was a dear friend, or even a relation, she knew Don Mac so well, so very well! And she had told them he never would want a lady to walk so far as Hermosa!

"Which Hermosa?"

But there Pedro fell back on his saints to witness how little he knew of the Señorita's intentions. It might be the Hacienda, it might be the settlement, or it might be even Old Mission, where she now lay. But since Don Mac—the saints be thanked!—had recovered the animal——

"From where did she come?"

Here again Pedro was useless. He did, indeed, think it must be from the railroad, but——

"Was she alone?"

"Sure!" This was the only reply of which Pedro was quite certain. The other lady in the stage had called to her, had implored her, but the Señorita had insisted on stopping alone at Pedro's, and Maria had made the coffee—and——

"She came in the stage?"

"Of course!"

"Why did you not tell me that at first?"

"First? But, señor, you no asking me that question!"

"Go on, get out. Diego, find the driver; he will know."

"Mother of God!" cried Pedro; "you no hearing yet about the stage?"

Leighton turned to Estrada questioningly.

"The word just got here, señor," said the latter. "The stage was caught somewhere after it turned into the cañon road and the driver and one horse was found five mile below,—no one else."

"Wait here," said Leighton, after a moment's thought, and then he made his way along the colonnade to the room of the Señorita. The child now lay beside the girl, one of its tiny fingers clasped in hers, while Anita sat on guard beside them, fearing some movement too abrupt for the wee morsel of humanity. The Señorita was sleeping quietly and Perenza nodded approval.

"It is good! We find a child to sleep beside her si she fret like that some more. This one too young yet for a plaything, too easy to break. Santa Maria, how she ever save him alive like she did?"

Leighton pointed to the brown dress over the back of a chair and the little leather bag beside it.

"The pocket! Give me any papers there."

Perenza opened the bag cautiously, while Anita looked on with wide-eyed curiosity. The possessions of the girl, like the girl herself, were regarded with something like awe by all who had seen her riding ahead of the flood. But even the sharp eyes of Perenza could find little to wonder at in the pockets,—a few coins, a few keys on a silver ring, a little hem-stitched handkerchief with an embroidered "A" in the corner, and last, a card with a name, "Miss A. J. Watson," and on the back in pencil was written the address in Hermosa, where the teacher from Kern County had meant to stop.

Leighton turned it over, regarding it dubiously.

It was a cheap, printed affair and bore little suggestion of relationship to the leather bag with its dainty lining and chain of silver, yet it was all he had to go by.

He copied it carefully and gave the copy to Estrada.

"Go to this place and ask if any friends or relatives of the young lady reside there. If you find her people, tell them where she is.—Understand?"

"Sure! You want that they come and take the Señorita of the moccasins to her own home—no?"

Leighton made an impatient gesture and Estrada departed hastily for his horse, and was directly heard clattering along towards the highway for Hermosa, while Leighton sank wearily back in his chair at Galbraith's door, and his face dropped forward in his hands as though hurt by the brilliant light on the white stones of the patio.

"You want that they come and take the Señorita?" The words of Diego echoed themselves mockingly in his ears. Did he want? She had taken up his work where he had laid it down. Through all the horror of that night, she was the one star shining clearly through the dusk for him, and he felt suddenly aggressive towards the unknown people who would come by and by, and gather her to themselves and bar him out.

Bar him out!—He uttered a contemptuous groan at his own folly. What was the girl to him? or what would he hope for in a young life like that? He had come back for work, the work he had shirked a year ago. He had not meant to shirk it, he had meant to do the one generous thing needed to render the daughter of his old friend absolutely happy. He had not legally turned over the management of the estate to her, neither had he legally relinquished the guardianship of her, though he probably would have thoughtlessly done both but for the restraining remembrance of his bondsmen. He had simply let go the reins with the sense of freedom, believing and hoping someway that it would be all right. Delfina's husband would certainly for his own interests help guard Delfina's estate; who could fancy that it could be otherwise?

But the "otherwise" was the thing he would have to face now. He counted over the few weeks or months until the daughter of Gonzales,—the man who had entrusted him with the care of her,—should reach her majority.—On that day, though it should sink the Mission rancho and all it contained, the estate of Hermosa must be put into her hands as clear of obligations as it was when Gonzales left it in his trust, and until that day came, there was only one trail of duty for him to follow.

Perenza, watching him from her end of the gallery, came over and squatted against a pillar beside him.

" Foot hurt bad, Don Mac? You make moan like Señor Braith, so I thinking maybe—— "

" Don't think, Tia Perenza, and don't mind me. I'm only getting acclimated again and it's harder knocks than usual."

Perenza nodded her head sagaciously.

" Si you bringing home a wife, that the best thing could ever happen this rancho, Don Mac. You no liking be all alone all your life—no? I hoping," she went on craftily, " you bring home some ver beautiful señora from that Mexico for that yellow hair Gonzales to see."

" Gonzales? "

" Um! " assented Perenza, " I ver glad all the time you no marrying with her. All same, I no like si she say my Don Mac no can si he want."

Her Don Mac laughed and his sombre thoughtfulness vanished.

" You're jealous, Perenza, but of the Señora Darrett you must speak with respect."

" Sure, when people listen! But I knowing that old man Gonzales, and I seeing that Dutch woman what he marry—ugh! Then I see the little fine lady when she riding up that hill each day to make talk with a man what hide sometimes——"

"Perenza!"

"Si!—I minding all what happen and that happen more as one dozen times! Ay de mi! I glad when you go to Mexico, for she no caring long for that pretty vagamunda! But si you come home without a wife, I sorry."

"A sick man is in this room, a dead woman in the sala, perhaps a dying girl over there, and you waste time to talk of a wedding, a wedding I shan't catch up with for a long time."

"Catch up?"

"My wedding plans are over—gone—dead! Funerals are more in my line now."

"That Señorita ver pretty girl, Don Mac."

Don Mac frowned impatiently.

"The year has not left us younger, Tia Perenza. We talk like children or people whose wits are gone. The Señorita may be beautiful as an angel, but she is not for our world."

"Not for our world!" Perenza stumbled to her feet, startled by his sudden intensity. To her his words only meant that the strange Señorita was marked beyond hope for death.

Leighton touched her arm and pointed to the sky line of the Sierras looming beyond the far ranges.

"Every day you have lived, you have seen the blue of the mountains, Perenza; have you ever climbed to the top of one?"

"Holy Mother! No!"

"Have you ever circled one to see what was on the other side?"

"Why I doing so big fool a thing? This is my side. I staying where I belong. That mountain,—when I was a girl bad Indians coming down sometimes from other side that mountain. I ver glad the mountain there to keep more bad ones out. The good God making it for a wall maybe. I hearing the Padre saying that with these two ears!"

"Yes. Well, the wall around your beautiful Señorita may have been built by the same agency or the opposite. But the wall is as high and as strong as the Mother Mountains, Perenza, and for me there is no path."

VII

FELIPE'S FATE.

The boarding-house keeper at Hermosa sent back word to Leighton that a school teacher, Miss Watson, had engaged board there in case she could get the school. But a teacher was already in charge, pending the recovery of the original pedagogue from a siege of typhoid. The man of the boarding house further stated that the correspondence concerning both the school and the boarding had been conducted by a sister-in-law of Miss Watson, who lived across in Kern County. The letters with addresses had been mislaid, but he would endeavor to find them.

Leighton read this bald statement which told him so little and that little not pleasant.

A school teacher! And of the class hoping to be accepted as a substitute, a stop gap! One whom her relatives had started out to make her own way and find a home as best she could among the not very select class in the straggling village of Hermosa.

Perenza heard him swear as he folded the letter, but she noticed that his expression was anything but harsh as he bade her to spare no pains in the care of the Señorita and to demand all the help she required. There was no one else to look after her.

"Then the relation of the Señorita, he no is coming for her?"

"It doesn't look likely."

"Not at all, not any time?" repeated Perenza incredulously, "not at any time when she have save the whole Hermosa valley?"

"They are people of leather hearts, her people, and they live far away. The Hermosa valley must make up to her for them."

"Hermosa!" grunted Perenza, not ill pleased. "Humph! that mean just you!"

"And you," he added.

"Madre de dios! how do I count? You taking care me all the same like I was sick like the Señorita, or little like the baby!"

But long after he had left the room Perenza sat knitting and staring at the sleeping girl. She had always thought Don Mac a fit mate for any crowned queen, then why—why did he make such talk of a high wall between him and a little school teacher, who wore shoes like the Indians? No path! Perenza grunted discontentedly, and thought of his handsome face and strong arms; what were they for but to clear paths wherever he wanted to go?

Was he still thinking of that Gonzales with the yellow frizzle top of hair? She prayed the saints to send the man more than the sense of a mule!

The sun was dropping far down in the west, and where she sat by the open door she could see the people coming and going in the patio, as they had been doing all day, some only curious, others to offer help, many with hearty welcome to Leighton.

The latter departed feeling that the year in Mexico had left him more than a year older; he was not the care-free comrade they had known. What had Mexico done to him?

Some of them plunged into the heart of the Hermosa problems, and despite the many claims on his attention, strove to sound him concerning the Darrett schemes, among which was a "wild-cat" railroad proposition so at variance with the needs of the district that it would bar out a branch road they had all been working for and which was to come in from a different direction. It was only a "boom" affair to fill the pockets of some outside speculators, but in some way they had got Felipe Darrett on their side and were using Hermosa as a base of operations. Factories and a sanitarium were among the several things projected, and for the latter the water from Old Mission reservoir was to be turned into a different channel. This meant that the lands heretofore receiving the benefits for which it had been constructed would be left aside from its path, useless for miles along the line, and the troubled ranchmen were in several cases not by any means certain whether they could keep Darrett from transferring the water right, if, as he claimed, the old reservoir did actually belong to the Gonzales tract and not, as had always been supposed, to the Old Mission tract itself.

Leighton listened to all, and committed himself to few decided opinions. To Darrett's avowed enemies he had said, "We will see." To Darrett's few friends he had stated that very clever promoters had been working the said road deal, and no one was so wise that he might not make mistakes under such pressure. Only when the old Hermosa dam was touched upon did he show a flash of feeling and decision.

"There will be a new survey made of those lines," he said, "so don't let the water rights worry you. The Gonzales heirs can't give any title to them. Gonzales and I discovered that the last survey was wrong. We made an agreement about it, but let it stand for the time. As some of you were invited to the wedding," he added, smiling, "you will understand why."

"That's so; if you had married the daughter, Hermosa would have had no dividing line!"

"And no broken dam last night," added another.

"Well, if I was too late for the wedding, I am here in time to protect the water rights and don't worry over the proposed booms and shaky railroad schemes; they will never get farther than the paper they are planned on. I can assure you the Gonzales tracts will not enter into the deal, at least not at the figures quoted."

"Oh, it's Darrett's crazy plunging," said one of the younger men. "I've always felt guilty for bringing him into the valley. But he seemed all right in Frisco, or else my drinks were mixed too often for clear sight. Anyway, he took me home one night when I could not find the way, so I thought he was a good fellow, and invited him down. I ought to have been kicked!"

"Nonsense!" said Leighton, easily. "Let me fill your glass. You were not to blame. He was an unusually attractive fellow, you know. It was all just a streak of dumb luck, like most things in life are, whether good, bad or indifferent."

What he really thought of Felipe Darrett none of them could guess, but they remembered that he was the first to welcome him back to Hermosa, and that he had given his old friends to understand that they must do likewise, and that he had established Darrett's social standing in the valley before he had left for Mexico. And now on his return he was almost the only one who had no word of blame for the mistakes which an enemy might have called crimes.

"But if he is even half a man, won't he show up now?" demanded one of the ranchmen who had come to offer help. He was speaking to a group at the opposite end of the patio from Leighton, and his words were clearly heard by Perenza, who sat with her endless knitting of linen lace at the Señorita's door. "Will he let Mac Leighton shoulder all this tribe, his employees, mind you! doctor the sick and bury the dead? I'll bet he is double locked in his own room over at the Hacienda, afraid of being mobbed, and shaking like a dose of ague every time the bell rings."

"Old Luigo says he went away yesterday evening," stated one of the more temperate citizens, named Mitchell, "went away and left some newly arrived guests in the house, lawyers who came by his appointment to settle some transfers of outlying tracts he was to sell. I guess they held an indignation meeting this morning and started on the back trail. Luigo looked very shaky and scary, but I had to take his word for it that his señora was in Frisco, and that Darrett had ridden away yesterday evening and had not returned."

"Not returned!—ridden away!—say——"

The men looked at each other quickly,—the same thought had come to each at the words. The path of the flood was many miles long: who could tell what riders had crossed it?

"That would look like a stroke of dramatic justice," remarked one of the men. "But it is not likely to happen. A man either on foot or on horseback could hear the flood coming in time to climb for high ground. Those people in the stage would have escaped, no doubt, if the clatter of the wheels had not drowned the roar until it was too close. There was a woman in it, too, a stranger by name of Ogden. Wouldn't have known even her name if Bert Hamilton hadn't chanced to hear it on the stage. His salvation was leaving it at Pedro's."

"Find the woman yet?"

"Not at last reports, and the chances are against it, after Quartz Creek reaches North Fork. The water was high, you know, all over, without the extra flood."

Then there was heard the clattering of shod hoofs on the paving without and across the yard, and into the patio rode an old man, hatless, and with straggling gray locks flying back from an ashen face.

He halted the panting animal and called hoarsely, gasping, while he shaded his eyes with his hand and peered at the group of men.

"The Don Mac, the Señor Leighton! I am come for him, I come for help!"

"What sort of help do you folks need?" demanded one of the ranchmen. "You people at the Hacienda are out of reach of danger."

"Justice!" shrilled the old voice, quavering with emotion and fury, "the justice of the good God! the justice of the laws for Don Felipe—my Felipe!"

Leighton heard the commotion and the high shrill tones, where he was seated for the moment by Galbraith's bed, and arising with an effort he reached for his crutch and went quietly as he could out on the porch, where the men were gathering more closely about the old man, whom he recognized as Luigo Castro, half servant, wholly friend, and in some way a distant relative of Felipe Darrett,—the one creature who had come with him from his old life into Hermosa.

He looked inquiringly at the old man, but said nothing. Mitchell, the man who had inquired at the Hacienda for Darrett, strode across the patio and caught the newcomer by the shoulder.

"What the devil do you mean, any way?" he demanded, a slight shake emphasizing his words. "Speak up! What sort of justice does your Don Felipe want of the valley? And why doesn't he come for it himself?"

"He no is coming at all—never any more,

Señor Mitchell—never any more!" and the old man broke down in sobs, looking much like an old woman shaken by grief, as his long hair fell over his eyes, and the black kerchief from his head had slipped down about his neck.

One of the men whistled meaningly.

"Vamosed, has he? Lit out?"

"Dead! The bullet in the heart!"

Old Luigo tossed the gray locks from his eyes and fairly hurled the shrill statement at the group. He knew, as did every one, how thoroughly Darrett had made himself disliked by the ranchmen, and Luigo's words held almost an accusation as he glared at them.

"By George!" said Mitchell, slowly, "I take back what I said against him. After all, perhaps, he had too much of his father's blood in him to stand the certainty that he had killed all those people! I didn't think he had that much conscience in him, but if he had, I take off my hat!"

"No—no—no!" shrilled the old Mexican instantly. "It is the bad people of the valley—the bad people who hate him—who jealous—who kill him alone in the old adobe in the vineyard! Caramba! Did I but find that man!"

The shrill tones of Luigo reached Galbraith, who turned restlessly and muttered disjointed words, but only Leighton heard him call again the forbidden name "Carmenita"; and reaching back, he carefully closed the door.

"Now, go easy and speak slow," advised Mitchell. "If Darrett is dead, let us hear how it happened. You told me this morning that he had gone away; then you didn't give me quite a straight story—eh?"

Luigo passed his hand over his brow as though dizzy and bewildered and Leighton reached out his hand with a quick, admonishing gesture as the old man swayed in the saddle.

"Help him, some of you! Lift him off and bring him here in the shade. Pete, hand us the brandy. Can't you see that the old fellow is done up? Be as—as easy as you can with him, poor devil!"

"His story doesn't seem probable," said Mitchell, doubtfully. "He is wild and imagines the murder part of it. The people who have had most reason, the flood refugees, haven't had time."

"But if he's dead, no matter how, you will have your work cut out for you," said one of the men to Leighton. "I mean straightening the tangles he has made of the Gonzales estate."

"Yes, I reckon so," assented Leighton, regarding Luigo, who was reviving under the stimulants, and staring about him confusedly. "My guardianship of the señora does not expire until she is of age."

"Whew! I'm glad to hear it! Old Manuel Gonzales had a level head in spite of his queer ways. You two were great friends?"

"Yes, great friends," repeated Leighton, mechanically.

"Well, you've got a working chance to prove it now. In less than five years she and Darrett wouldn't have a dollar," remarked Mitchell. "You've struck home just in time to save his daughter from what would seem like the poorhouse to her, and no one else could do it."

"No, I reckon not," agreed Leighton in the same thoughtful way.

And Perenza, who had heard all from where she sat, struck her needles vigorously into the knitting. Don Mac was not, she could see, giving his thoughts to the words he spoke. He was thinking, no doubt, that Doña Delfina was now a widow and that she would again, perhaps, drive her ponies to the Mission rancho and carry him off, as of old, into the Mission hills for the *merienda*—and—perhaps——

But Perenza had no patience to picture the future in the face of such a calamity. She was, perhaps, the only one in the valley, except Luigo, who actually wished with intensity that Felipe Darrett was alive and destined to a ripe old age, that Delfina Gonzales might remain safely bound to him and without freedom to turn her eyes to Don Mac, whom any woman, even a fool, would regret after a year with that handsome *mestizo*.

Luigo, recovering speech and breath, was telling with many oaths and prayers and moans how the grand gentlemen from the railroad had come the evening before for the big dinner to which Don Felipe had invited them, the lawyers and all, to sell or buy the land, he did not know which; and how angry they were when Don Felipe failed to meet them, his guests, at all; and how they had all gone away in a very bad humor, only the lawyer, Señor Atterly, waiting all night, and sending many telegrams; and how, at last, all the men who could ride were called in and given horses to circle the land till they found him; for no one had seen him on any road—anywhere! By the little adobe in the vineyard they had come on his horse, which had evidently been tied there many hours, and in the adobe——

Leighton, sitting in his big lounging chair at Galbraith's door, listened with the others to the halting, pregnant recital. Mitchell had shot one keen glance at him when the lawyers and railroad men were mentioned, a glance he read and understood, though he made no sign. With his chin resting on his hand, he was following each incident as Luigo pictured it. And Perenza, who had moved near and stopped beside him, failed to attract his attention until she plucked him by the sleeve and forced his notice. Then he turned his eyes slowly towards her, but did not speak. His glance only gave her permission to do so and she stooped over the arm of the chair close to his ear.

"The Señorita!" she whispered in Spanish. "Señor Mitchell saying you now give all your time to the Gonzales ranchos to save all the moneys for that woman! But Señor Mitchell no knowing all about that Señorita, how she is doing your work and is killed—almost! Si she is sick like that, your time is her time and no belong to any other woman at all, maybe not belong even to your own self! How you think?"

VIII

THE INQUEST.

Coroners' inquests are not nice things, and the one held on the body of Felipe Darrett was strangely and unusually unpleasant for several reasons. The evidence, plainly visible to the jury, showed that Darrett, loading his revolvers, had by some accident discharged one of them and that the bullet had penetrated his own heart, producing, according to the medical diagnosis, instant death.

The verdict was in accordance with the facts found, and all the official work of the case, merely the taking of the testimony of his own household who had seen him ride away, and that of the man who had found the body, was very simple indeed. But every man of the Hermosa valley, who was present, was conscious of many hidden things not brought out by the evidence, and which none of them cared particularly to investigate.

It was true that the revolvers were identified as Darrett's own,—the house was on the Gonzales estate, and the key to it was found in his pocket. He had unlocked the door to enter. He had tied his horse in the shed under cover instead of in the yard without. He had gone there, deliberately, for some reason of his own. What that reason was, could not even be conjectured.

One man, a Mexican, stated that he had seen a woman meet Don Felipe in that garden several weeks ago. But the coroner stated that unless there was evidence that the woman had been there at the time of the tragedy, he could not see how she could be connected with it. However, if it could be proven that it was Mr. Darrett's custom to ride to that particularly isolated house to meet the woman in question, it might be as well to send for her. The coroner was a man from Olivette, ten miles away, and knew nothing of the gossip or factional strife of the district.

The men looked at each other, and as one of the Mexican workmen was about to speak, Leighton checked him.

" The girl and the child are at my home, Mr. Jackson. The girl was drowned in the Hermosa flood. All of these men know that it would not have been possible for her to be here, and I think most of them would rather not hear her name dragged into this."

" That's so.—Her baby was only a few days old.—Likely she died before he did," were some of the comments, and they looked from one to the other with renewed interest.

" If this is so,—and he was indirectly the canse of her death, you know,—this very fact may give a clue as to whether there could have been any one with Mr. Darrett at the time of his death—any friend of the girl's, sweetheart, or relative, who——"

"The girl and her grandmother were utterly alone in the world," interrupted Leighton. "Both died in the flood. Most of the men here have known her all her life. Have any one among you ever heard any man's name mentioned as her lover? Any man who would be likely to follow Felipe Darrett for revenge?"

"That's so!" stated one of the others. "Only one man's name has ever touched her, and there he is!" And he pointed to the rigid form on the floor.

"Ah—h!" the coroner nodded comprehendingly. "And there is a child?" He polished his spectacles thoughtfully for a moment and then continued: "Well, gentlemen, this gives a new interest to the case, but no light to go by except a choice of conclusions. Did Mr. Darrett accidently discharge the weapon causing his death, or did he,—while laboring under the horror and remorse of the deaths caused by the flood, and of that one death in particular, the death of the mother of his child,—did he, overcome by the horror of the situation, deliberately seek this retired spot, the place of their meetings, and intentionally fire the shot causing his own death? This is the only visible reason yet given for his presence in this particular isolated place."

"Yes," drawled one of the younger men, "but you would need a more visible reason than that if you had ever known Felipe Darrett. Remorse? Not any! The little girl would have starved to death at the last but for a man I know. And no matter who died, he would keep on living, you bet, as long as people would let him!"

"The man is dead," said Leighton curtly. "Give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Exactly," assented the coroner. "Individually and privately we can do all that, but officially and publicly we can't advance that theory as a cause of death. Only the seeking of this isolated spot suggests suicide. All the other evidence goes to strengthen the accident theory, and a verdict according to the facts as found."

Thus it was that the question was decided, and the body of Felipe Darrett was lifted and carried out of the low door, followed by old Luigo, weeping no longer, but silent, sullen and suspicious of the Americans, coroner and all!

His own idea, repeatedly insisted upon, was that Don Felipe had gone to meet some one, to fight some one, and for that reason had taken the pistols.

He had been very angry all day and in the afternoon he had sent Luigo for the cartridges.

When Luigo got back, Don Felipe was walking on the terrace, impatient, while Roderiguez held his horse; but as soon as he detected Luigo, he mounted at once, reached for the cartridges, looked at his watch, and galloped away. That was late in the afternoon. Luigo was sure he rode to meet some one.

But the coroner and jury had alike weighed Luigo's personal opinions lightly. His black, ferret-like eyes had peered at each and every one of them with sour suspicion. To him the inquest was a farce and an insult to Don Felipe. Why should that girl and her brat be flung at the dead man in that manner? Caramba! If a caballero stole an hour with a girl some lucky night, must he feed her and her relations forever? He cursed the American ways and the Americans themselves, and spat upon the memory of their ancestors.

Leighton had shown him more consideration than the others—that was Leighton's way—but even he had not secured the justice Luigo had hoped for, and crushed and hopeless, the old man walked his cow pony in the wake of the undertaker's wagon along the road to the Hacienda Hermosa.

Then a strange thing occurred. As the cavalcade wound slowly down from the vineyard, another procession passed along the road at the foot of the hill;—so large a procession indeed that it appeared as if the entire valley had turned out in carriages, on horseback and afoot. Many of the pedestrians were hatless and shoeless, as they had escaped from the flood of the cañon; they were the refugees and their friends, following with reverent steps the bodies of Carlotta Alverez and her granddaughter, Carmenita, as they were borne to a resting place within the exclusive grounds of the Gonzales cemetery. The denseness of the shrubbery had prevented the two processions coming in sight of each other until they simultaneously reached the junction of the two roads.

The men bearing the body of Carmenita scowled meaningly at each other as they realized the situation and quickened their steps to pass the meeting of the ways first; but the undertaker leaped from the wagon and hastened in advance.

" One minute, my man," he said, seeing the barefooted Mexicans and their burden, " one minute, if you please, until we reach the gates of the Hacienda. You must give way for the dead master of Hermosa! "

The old priest stepped from a carriage of the Mission rancho and walked to the head of the column. He was very old and his face paled with excitement as he leaned on a cane and raised the crucifix with a gesture of supreme authority over the black draped bier.

"Give way, you, to that master's victim!" he commanded steadily. "Go on, my children, I will wait till all have passed."

The men of the jury and the witnesses, all who knew the story of those two, stood uncovered until the long procession filed by, and Leighton, dismounting with some difficulty, obeyed a sign from the priest and entered the carriage with the aged man, who was trembling visibly under the nervous strain of the encounter.

"It is not for us to judge either the living or the dead," he said, sinking back among the cushions; "but neither is it well for these, my barefooted children in the dust, to feel that wealth makes distinction even after death."

Their carriage was the last. After them, the men of the jury moved their horses into couples and brought up the rear, leaving only the undertaker, the coroner, and Luigo to follow the body of Felipe Darrett, the man who had ruled like a young sultan over their thousands of acres for one brief, calamitous year.

IX

DONA DELFINA.

On the terrace of the Hacienda, a carriage had just halted, and a man and woman, stepping from it, stopped at the entrance to the court and stared at the immense procession entering the great gates of the house park. The woman held a lace-trimmed dot of a handkerchief to her eyes, and rested her fingers appealingly on the man's coat sleeve.

"Isn't it pathetic?" she murmured. "All those poor people! Even when my father died there was no such—such demonstration. The poor souls, some of them are barefooted! How devoted of them! And Felipe, you know, had only been among them for a year."

"There certainly does appear to be a great number of people," agreed her companion. "Shall we go in? You can't possibly see them now, Mrs. Darrett. They are likely to be as demonstrative as they are affectionate—and—it would be entirely too exhausting for you. Your own health and nerves must be considered, my dear lady. We had better go in."

"Just—just as you say, Mr. Atterly," agreed the widow. "I really don't know what I should have done this day without you, your advice and sympathy. To think—just to think! I should have had to drive home in a hired carriage and alone, but for you! I never shall forget it, never!"

"The servants were so distracted——" began Mr. Atterly.

"Oh, the servants were not to blame, of course; they have no heads on their shoulders! But Mac Leighton you tell me is back, and he has always managed affairs here, even the most trifling! And now, when something really awful has happened, he leaves me to get home any way I can."

"They say he was crippled trying to warn the workmen."

"Crippled! A crippled foot needn't affect his brain! He always—why, where in the world are those people going?"

They had entered the sala and from one of the deep windows she had caught a glimpse of the procession along the lower drive. They had entered the gates, but instead of approaching the Hacienda, they were moving slowly along the way leading to the far corner of the great park enclosed by Manuel Gonzales as the estate of the dead.

"Most peculiar!" agreed Mr. Atterly. "It can't be that they mean to——"

"Mean to bury him without even waiting for me to see him!" sobbed the widow, bewildered and indignant. "It is an outrage! You see how I am ignored, Mr. Atterly! You see how I need——" But her needs were smothered in the handkerchief, while Mr. Atterly stared in perplexity from the sobbing woman to the slowly moving line of people, not half of whom had yet entered the gate.

A maid was silently removing her mistress's wraps and very chic black hat, at the same time slipping a fresh handkerchief into her limp hand.

"The señora will want some tea? I will have it immediately," she said soothingly, and hurried past the staring Mexican servants, who had gathered from every corner to watch the arrival of the señora and the lawyer, who had been Don Felipe's most constant companion of late. The Mexicans stared at each other, half frightened as they heard her angry tone and her sobs.

Never could they remember her coming without a party of gay friends. She frankly detested country life and only found it tolerable when she could bring as much of the city as possible with her; and her coming always meant many beds to make and much cooking. For a funeral, of course, all the friends would come, besides all the relatives and all the connections of either side of the house.

Thus it had been decided in the kitchen the night before, and no one had slept a wink since because of the preparations. Every bed in the house was ready for an occupant that minute. The chickens were not only killed, but ready for the roasting pan. Marta, the cook, had a table half across the kitchen heaped with cakes of many kinds, and the custards browning in the pans. The tables were lengthened to their extreme limit in the dining-room, the plates were already laid, and all for the Señora Darrett, who knew nothing of the delicate differences of flavorings, and for the lean lawyer of the railroad who had that morning asked—Mother of God!—for a cup of boiled water and a dry toast for his breakfast!

Marta could not leave the oven and the rest were afraid to return and report that not one soul besides the señora and the lawyer had come. And they huddled together like frightened sheep in the court, and heard the exclamations and sobs of their señora, while the maid, "Mees Ana," swept past them with the scorn she would have given pigs, and went to see personally to the tea.

"I—I really beg of you!" remonstrated the lawyer, who was conscious of the peering eyes and helpless as to the sobbing woman. "If there is anything I can do—anything!"

"Don't go away. I simply can't be alone! Send some one to tell them I am here, tell them——"

" Certainly, at once! Here, you fellow with the sash, run quickly! Tell them that Mrs. Darrett orders that they bring the—the—remains here to the house! Do you hear?" he demanded, as Roderiguez stared at him with wild eyes. " There is to be no funeral to-day, tell them at once!"

The man slouched away a few yards and halted. His comrades, male and female, fell back a few paces, ready to resume their household duties if the stranger should assign them also to new and unwelcome tasks.

Mr. Atterly's thin face took on an added degree of color.

" Why do you not go?" he demanded with concentrated wrath. " Do you not understand?"

" I no going," stated Roderiguez, resting himself sullenly on the base of a marble urn. " The Padre he no like; he maybe sending my soul to hell, si I stop the dead body after the prayers being said. The señora, she no knowing anything about that—she——"

" There!" cried the señora herself, as she heard this opinion through the open window. " You see why I wanted to sell the horrid place! No money will pay these pigs to be obedient and respectful! Ana! Ana! My hat! This is an outrage! an insult! I shall stop that crazy old priest and let him see who is mistress of Hermosa!"

Ana, entering with the tea, had to put it aside and find the hat with its sweeping folds of silken veil, and fasten it quickly on the fluffy blond hair, while Mr. Atterly attempted in vain to dissuade her from going personally to meet the people of the funeral. If one Roderiguez was not to be moved by her wishes, what could one hope from a mob of this kind?

And Roderiguez, watching her cross the sward leaning on the ever ready arm of the lawyer, first crossed himself and then grinned as he saw them take the short cut across the terrace to head off the funeral train.

It was farther than it looked, and at the stone wall where the fountain was they must make a detour. Roderiguez, who knew each foot of it, reckoned that they would reach the drive about the time the last carriage passed, and he grinned again at the fancy of how the hot water and toast man would look making the race to the head of the procession to stop it, or else how he would look on foot, with his long legs and black clothes following in the dust! It would also not be pleasant for the señora. But Roderiguez rolled a cigarette, and waited, and did not care much for the señora either. She had been under a roof, safe alongside a good cooked dinner, and *Madre de dios!* and why not stay where one is well off?

Mr. Atterly lifted an imperious hand to the first driver who came within hailing distance. But the man only stared and guided his horses carefully that the wheels might not over-reach on the velvety green of the park. The episode of the undertaker near the vineyard had been too recent, and the authority of Father Rey too absolute for him to halt now for some stranger. Perhaps the stranger and the woman with the black veil wanted to ride, but he had all the load his horses could pull, and the strangers had good shoes to walk with!

The señora gasped with annoyance and clung to the lawyer's arm appealingly.

"What an outrage—an outrage!" she said fiercely. "I—they are making me ill. I shall faint! One would think I had no rights to my own husband! Oh, make them stop—make them stop!"

Mr. Atterly did so, but he did it by stepping squarely in front of a carriage team, and catching them by the bits. The señora, still clinging to his arm, stood beside him in the middle of the drive, half sobbing and hysterical.

"What is this? What is this?" demanded Father Rey from the carriage window. The lawyer held the horses while the driver tugged at the lines and swore in Spanish.

"It is Mrs. Darrett's orders that this line of people stop where they are and that the body be taken to the Hacienda before burial. The sooner some of you ride ahead and stop the others, the less inconvenience and distress of mind you will cause her."

"Distress of mind!" was repeated in deeper tones from the priest's carriage. "Let me see this gentleman, father. I can't twist myself across to that window because of my crippled foot. There!" he exclaimed as he finally reached the window, from which the lawyer was visible. "May we ask, sir, who you are and why this order comes from Mrs. Darrett?"

"Why it comes!" cried the widow hysterically. "Mac Leighton, have you no sort of consideration left? I supposed you were injured, helpless, and it is you who allow this outrage! I never in the world expected to find you ignoring my rights in this way, allowing these people——"

"Mrs. Darrett, my dear lady!" said Mr. Atterly, pressing her arm, for her voice had grown shrill in anger and the men on horseback were moving closer and regarding this scene curiously.

"I will speak. It is an outrage!" Then she waved her hand as in dismissal of both Leighton and the priest. "This gentleman is Mr. Atterly, my business manager in the future! He knows my wishes! I give him full power to enforce them!" And she was turning away defiantly, when Leighton opened the carriage door and faced her on the drive.

"Wait a bit, Delfina," he suggested in a kindly, tolerant, yet decided way. "Mr. Atterly may be your manager after my guardianship is over—but——"

"Guardianship!" she ejaculated, "when I'm married!"

"But since under your father's will you are not yet of age to act with regard to the management of the estate, you will have to put up with me until then. Father Rey will tell you some other time why Hermosa owes those women grave room; and I owe it to your father to see that Hermosa pays its debts."

"Grave room! Those women! What women? It is Felipe I want brought home, Felipe I want."

"Mrs. Darrett," said Mr. Mitchell, whose horse had pressed close to the carriage, "there is some mistake in your mind about all this. Felipe will reach the house before you; that's the undertaker's wagon just going up the grade. This is the funeral of Carolina Alverez and her grandchild, Carmenita, who were killed by the flood of the new Hermosa dam."

Delfina cast one appalled look towards the solitary spring wagon in which the undertaker and coroner were moving leisurely up the drive, followed by the bent figure of old Luigo on the cow pony. Then her eyes followed incredulously the line of vehicles and horsemen, reaching far around the bend of the drive and out of sight. The funeral of some obscure Mexicans!

As a realization of the contrast came to her she gasped for breath, articulated but one intense, withering word, "Outrage!" and then sank back into the arms of Mr. Atterly in a very real faint.

X

DELFINA AND DON MAC HAVE AN INTERVIEW.

The days to follow were days of storm and stress to Delfina Darrett. She had stormed indignantly at Leighton's interference in her affairs, had sold Hermosa outright to Mr. Atterly's clients and had been furious when Leighton showed the latter that Mrs. Darrett's signature could give him no title. Upon which, Mr. Atterly tried to spell-bind Leighton with visions of what a god-send to posterity their proposed changes would make in the valley.

Leighton insinuated that he was not particularly interested in Atterly's posterity, at which the mistress of Hermosa had declared that Mac Leighton was insulting her friends, and that for her part she meant to leave the country and not put foot in it again until she was legally of age,—then she would show Mac Leighton! In fact, she did go. But her beloved Frisco proved a tantalizing place in which to take up one's abode when in full mourning. She wrote daily letters of reproach to Leighton for two weeks and received in reply one note as follows:

My Dear Delfina:—

I have much to do at present trying to tie up your estate so that you and Mr. Atterly will have good mental exercise trying to untie it. In fact, I have too much to do to spare time for talking about it,—my only excuse for not replying in detail to your questions. Of course, since you are more comfortable among your friends of the city, I would advise you to remain there.

Yours faithfully, Mac.

Whereupon, Delfina took the next train for Hermosa.

And when, after some delay, Leighton responded to her written request carried by Luigo Castro to the Old Mission, he found her walking restlessly up and down the sala, where she received him with a petulant smile.

"You are looking remarkably well, Delfina, but you lack at least two inches for tragedy. Come, sit down and confess how many different kinds of a brute you think me. After that's off your mind you'll feel better."

Delfina was making a sweeping turn of the sala, dragging much graceful dull black flouncing in her wake. But at Leighton's words she rested herself abruptly with the width of the gorgeous room between them.

"What has come over you, Mac Leighton?" she demanded. "Mexico has made a different person of you!"

"You should not quarrel with that," he observed; "you did not like the old person so well."

"At least he was not a stubborn sphinx to deal with; one could argue him out of his crazy notions sometimes!"

"No—no, you couldn't, Delfina," he said, crossing over and drawing a chair beside her. "I was weak and careless and gave in to you often because things did not matter so much then. But now—well—if I talked until the moon rose, I couldn't tell you all the tangles of the estate and I don't mean to try. It was in good running order a year ago when I left it. I should have held on with a tighter grip than ever when you married, I should have remembered, first, last and all the time, my promise to your father. Well, I didn't! I took a lot of things for granted and left it in your hands! In a short time it goes back into your hands—and Mr. Atterly's! And it must go back in the condition it was when I let go. That is why I can't listen to your arguments—or Mr. Atterly's. Roderiguez tells me he is here again?"

She flashed a sharp glance at him and slipped some rings on and off her fingers before replying.

"Is it on his account you are so—so impossible?" she inquired. And Leighton smiled.

"Not exactly. Still, I tell you frankly, Delfina, I wish I could be sure he had a substantial wife at home somewhere."

"Mac, how dare you? And poor Felipe——" Her handkerchief smothered her murmured sentences for a moment, and then she turned on him angrily. "You have not one particle of feeling!"

"Not much," he agreed, "but neither has Mr. Atterly. He is about the cleverest man, Delfina, you have had to deal with. He had Felipe beautifully tangled up in financial matters, thinking he could scoop in this place for a song, and he fell very flat when he learned that neither your signature nor Felipe's counted for a penny. In fact your good friend, Mr. Atterly, is very much out of pocket because of his friendship and he is diplomatically waiting until the tide turns, that is, until you are of age. He may try to marry you before that to make sure of you; but he will be your devoted cavalier at any rate until you sign away the Hermosa for his promise to pay; and he will make a fortune out of the Hacienda as a sanitarium."

Delfina, justly indignant, drew her flouncings closer, and glanced past him in disdain.

"You were unfeeling before; now you are indecent! No one marries under a year!"

"Oh, yes, they do, Delfina; that is why I am hoping Atterly is a family man."

"I shouldn't listen to you! I positively shouldn't! One would think that I never had an offer that was not made to my money!"

"Yes, you have had, and you will have more," he remarked, smilingly; "but you won't listen to them, Delfina. It's a matter of temperament. The man with the money eye appeals to you and the man who hasn't it, doesn't—that's all!"

"Did you come here to insult me?"

"No, indeed! I came here because you sent for me. You have not yet told me why."

"I've forgotten. How can one think with such shocking suggestions in their ears? I had a dozen things to say to you. But I am utterly wretched and you make me more so, and you know it. Atterly! If you had acted like your natural self that awful day, I should have forgotten Atterly's name by this time! But you—everybody—forgot me, but him. He was the only one to sympathize with me in the least!"

She was crying by this time and Leighton arose and walked to the window looking out on the wonderful semi-tropical gardens he had helped Gonzales plan. It was not so very long ago and the old man had planned each arbor and each fountain with the thought of Delfina always in his mind. He had worshipped and spoiled her always,—the pretty little yellow-haired, petted child! Perhaps Leighton had helped him spoil her in those days; he thought it quite probable, and coming back, he touched her kindly on the shoulder.

"Look here, Delfina, don't let us quarrel. I've got to do the thing you object to. You'll get over that when you are older and realize the situation. I know you hate the country, and always did; but you have a town home, you don't have to live here just because you own it. But don't be persuaded to sell it at the figures Felipe considered. The place is a gold mine if rightly managed. All those young orchards, only an expense until now, are commencing to bear and by next year they will bring a small fortune in themselves. Gonzales knew what he was doing when he planted them, and the place was the pride of his heart."

"Oh he had lived in the diggings of Mexico all his life, so of course it was grand to him!" agreed Gonzales' daughter from behind her handkerchief. "And the people have treated him differently: they didn't make him miserable with their spying eyes and their disobedience. They were all set against Felipe and me from the first; we had an awful time with them! No wonder he tried to sell it and get away; I wanted to go as much as he did! And Mr. Atterly was kind to arrange it, Felipe trusted him, Felipe——"

"All right," said Leighton, "I'll agree that he is a philanthropist of the highest order, if you only don't cry."

"You—it's on your account the—the natives act as they do here," she sobbed. "They blamed us for your going away!"

"Oh no, don't you believe it!"

"They do! They fairly hated Felipe! Luigo is right; some of them did kill him! Oh, you needn't stare as if I was crazy, I know they did. Felipe never, never would have done it himself! And as if I had not enough to bear, that old priest had to tell me about the awful girl you had buried here, that I'll never forgive!" she declared sitting suddenly erect and facing him.

"Softly, softly, Delfina! Don't let us go back to that."

"Luigo says you are taking care of her child; is that true?"

"I haven't exactly turned infant's nurse yet," he remarked, "but the child is up at the Mission. There are several other children there, some of their mothers, too, waiting till we can build homes to replace those lost in the flood. You did not send for me because you cared to hear about them, did you?"

He smiled down on her indulgently, but she maintained her severe attitude.

"If you were at all like your old self, I should not need to send for you, or question you either; but—" and she suddenly looked at him direct and disapprovingly—"who is the 'Señorita' who is seen in your gardens these days? Is she an importation from Mexico? You ought to know people are talking."

She saw his face change slightly, a flush, a tightening of the jaws.

" She is a school teacher, a lady injured in the flood," he said at last. " She is not entirely recovered; her relatives have not yet come for her."

" Oh, then she has relatives? The Mexicans are telling some queer things about her."

" Queer? "

" Well, that no one knows where she came from, but that she was first seen on your rancho riding your horse, the day you arrived from Mexico! Of course the coincidence was remarked, especially since it occurred in a bachelor's establishment."

She laughed lightly and looked at him with half-closed eyes.

" Don't get angry, Mac, it's so unusual with you—and a bad sign! Blushing is quite as compromising," she added with evident relish. " No, the Mexican women have not hurt your reputation any, but I have not heard that any of them were astonishingly handsome! Your Señorita—' Miss Moccasins ' Luigo said she was called—is quite electrifying every man who sees her."

" Was Luigo electrified? "

" He was not near enough. He said she was swinging in a hammock with Señor Braith attendant. Perenza told Luigo that she was more beautiful than a picture of the virgin."

"Perenza is licensed to exaggerate. She is very much attracted to the young girl, whose name is Watson," he replied briefly, and then changed the subject abruptly. "Delfina, don't let us talk of my home or my affairs; tell me what you can of your own and Felipe's, I mean regarding any outside obligations you may have incurred during the past year. I don't mean the mortgages you gave jointly for money you used in speculation,—I know all about those,—I mean personal dealings. I understand you have retained Mr. Atterly to settle Felipe's affairs, but tell me truly, Delfina, had Felipe anything but debts to settle?"

"He had a little rancho near Santa Barbara, at least he thought he had it until he tried to sell it. Then he found he would have to receive a release from his half sister before he could give a clear title, for she owned one half."

"I didn't know he had a sister!"

"A half sister. Her mother was an eastern woman. The girl has been back there with some old aunts for years. She was silly over the little rancho and wild to come out here, but I suppose Felipe's death will change all that."

"What became of the rancho?"

"Oh, growing up with weeds, I suppose. He was disgusted with it. Then I know he never wanted her to come out—sort of afraid of her, I guess. By her letters he could see she thought him a good deal more perfect than any man could possibly be. She is only a school girl, old maidish as her grand-aunts, I suppose."

"Why not send for her now that you are alone?" suggested Leighton. "You will need a companion, and if she has no more capital than Felipe, she would perhaps welcome the salary such a position would give."

"Oh, she's poor enough, I dare say. Felipe couldn't tell me anything about that. The old aunts were no relation to him, you know. But I shan't send for her. I'm blue enough without any strange mourning relatives around. I've never had a word from her since I wrote her of Felipe's death. Queer, isn't it?"

While they talked, Ana came in with a tea tray and the mail-bag. Then while Delfina busied herself with the cups and the brew, Leighton unlocked the bag and sorted out the letters from the circulars and printed matter.

She accepted the little stack of letters and was laying them carelessly aside when the address of the one on top caught her attention. She picked it up with an exclamation of wonder.

"My own letter returned to me from Anchor Darrett!—returned without being opened!—why—what——"

Leighton looked at the envelope held out to him and pointed to an inscription in the corner.

"Not returned, forwarded," he said; "forwarded here. Which means that your sister-in-law is somewhere on her way to visit you. Anchor Darrett! A name of character."

"Her father gave nautical names to everything on the rancho, I believe, and attached some special significance to the girl's name,—never meant to sail again or something of that sort. Horrid, horrid name,—isn't it?"

"I rather like it, and I rather like the feeling of the man prompting him to call her that. I've met a few of the older people who knew the father and they have only good words for him."

"But you won't say that of the son!" she blazed out resentfully. "I know the other people have hated him and were jealous of him, but you——"

"Tut, tut, Delfina, we never quarreled about him when he was living, don't let us do it now. Tell me what you can about those debts. I can't adjust matters until you do. Delfina, don't make it any more difficult for me; it's harder for me than you perhaps realize."

Something in his tone caused her to look at him very directly, and she was suddenly aware that he was thinner and had less color than formerly. That, then, was why he looked changed since his stay in Mexico. Perhaps he had been ill—perhaps——

She could not but remember why he had gone to Mexico,—had he really cared for her so much after all? Was that the reason his manner was so different? Did that explain——? Her face flushed as she looked at him and remembered his jollity over her elopement, his wonderful help to Felipe, who had aroused antipathies from the first by his romantic dash and promiscuous love-making,—the way in which he had helped them both and then effaced himself for a year! All this came back to her with a new meaning as he spoke.

She even fancied him handsomer than of old; he had been so big, so rugged, so direct and absolutely non-romantic that he had only appealed to her as a bulwark of strength. Everybody relied upon his help in emergencies, but whom did he rely upon? Or when had he ever needed anybody? Delfina had been very sure he had not needed her, which made more potent the effect of the ardent love songs sung by the more practiced Felipe.

But if Don Mac had of old spoken to her in this strangely appealing tone and looked at her from such strangely serious dark eyes, well, the history of the Hermosa might have been a very different affair!

" I don't want to make things difficult for you," she said, twisting her handkerchief into a rope and then carefully smoothing it out again. "I have been simply broken-hearted over—over everything!—and you were the last one to see it or show any sympathy. I have to go to some one in all this trouble, and it's your own fault if I have to turn to strangers after all these years. Of course it makes me irritable."

"Oh, is that it?" he asked quietly. "Perhaps I have grown careless during these days of rush. Have patience with me and I'll try to make amends."

"Well, I'm glad you came over," she admitted. "Every one stays away from the house as if it had the plague. I brought a few people down, but it's too deadly dull, they can't endure it."

"You'd better leave Luigo and Marta in charge and go back to town."

"I'm half afraid to trust Luigo Castro with anything. He goes about as if he were in a trance. And do you know he has had all the outlying members of the Castro tribe to a sort of feast here, some sort of a family affair, a gathering of the clan."

"For what?"

"To take up the question where the coroner left off and find Felipe's murderer."

"They are wasting time," said Leighton, after a moment's silence. "Yes, I heard there was a gathering of Felipe's many cousins, but I didn't know it was Luigo's doings."

"They are a horrid lot and they hang around like a lot of spies. They used to beg from Felipe whenever they could and now they are such an awful nuisance that I am glad to give them money to go away."

"Don't do it again; leave them to me."

"They will hate you. Marta says they are down on you already."

"Since when? It doesn't matter, of course, but I wonder why."

"It's on account of Galbraith. Then you are both 'Americans,' you know, and they know you would stand by him."

"Galbraith?" and Leighton's tones were incredulous—"why, Galbraith never bothers them."

"He threatened Felipe, you know, threatened to shoot him. I guess it was on account of that girl. And I hear Galbraith was drinking that day. Of course he might not have even remembered his own threats the next day! But Luigo has gathered up a lot of gossip about it and they drink bad whisky together and talk it over, and Marta says they threaten to make much trouble before they are through."

"I shall offer every one of them work on the foundations of the new dam, and it is going down to bed rock this time, Delfina. If they refuse to work, Braith will clear them out of the place; he's able to be around again. So remember, if they come to you for more dollars, you send them to me!"

"Then they will hate me, too!" she hazarded. But he laughed away her fears, and dextrously excusing himself from her invitation to dinner, he took his departure, leaving the mistress of Hermosa in a much more tractable frame of mind. And in his inner coat pocket rested the letters and papers belonging to Felipe as well as some notes concerning the little Santa Barbara rancho, "Treasure Trove," and even a couple of letters from the sister found by Delfina among the rest.

"Of course they are of no business importance," she said, "but you can see by them what sort of a place it used to be. I don't suppose it has any special money value now. Heavens! I hope she isn't coming out here with the expectation of finding it fit to live in!"

She watched Leighton as he mounted El Diablo and rode away. How strong and handsome he was!

Felipe had been handsome, too, and she walked to the end of the sala and stood before a life-size portrait of Felipe painted for her in the early weeks of her marriage, when all the glamour of his dark Mexican beauty had blinded her to other types.

"He was beautiful!" she thought. "It was his beauty made the people jealous, made the men hate him!"

But as she turned away she caught a glimpse of Leighton passing out of the park gates and remembered hearing him called the handsomest man in the Hermosa valley. But who had ever heard of men being jealous of Leighton's physical advantages? Who ever heard of men hating him because women loved him? And women had loved him no doubt, did love him——

Then she suddenly struck one hand in the other angrily, and shut her teeth with a little click.

"His Señorita! I let him have the papers. I told him all he wanted to know, and after all, I let him go without learning a single real fact about the girl!"

XI

GHOSTS.

Leighton rode past the wrecked dam where the men were already blasting and digging at the new foundation and the workmen greeted him in kindly fashion, and nodded to each other meaningly when he had passed.

"He comes from the widow. Caramba! It is not for nothing he working to make richer her rancho! They will marry after all—no?"

"Sure! He will make all come right in the Hermosa, Don Mac has the luck!"

And the man with the luck galloped on to where the new houses for the workmen were building, then across the rise to where the young olive orchard was being planted; then taking a short cut across the pasture to the road, he passed around the hill where the vineyard of the old adobe joined a field of alfalfa, and at a sound among the thick rows of vines above, he halted Diablo and faced about at sound of hoof beats on the sheltering hill.

It was Galbraith, and Leighton watched him curiously as he approached, his head bent thoughtfully as his horse picked its way along the bluff.

The attitude of Galbraith and Leighton had been strangely changed since the former had been able to be on his feet. No word had been spoken between them of Leighton's surveillance over him, and muscular admonitions to silence. The names of Darrett or Carmenita had not been spoken by him since his delirium, which convinced Leighton that he was giving the subject extra thought. His silence, someway, put a guard on Leighton's tongue, and for the first time in their friendship of ten years, there was a wall of reserve between the two men—a certain barrier neither of them could break down.

Galbraith's face was not only thoughtful, it was troubled. He was a man slightly older than Leighton and about the same height, good looking in a fair-haired, blue-eyed, square-shouldered way, a hard worker, sometimes a hard drinker, a good friend, and one of the millions who are described as "no one's enemy but his own."

But his knocking about the world had given him a certain polish that at times made strangers wonder that so fine a fellow could be content for years to look after another man's stock. There was wealth waiting in California, or, indeed, in most lands, for men of his ability. But some one who knew would mention that little crook of the elbow and lift their brows, and all was explained: A fine vessel without a compass drifting fatefully on open seas!

It was understood from some words dropped by him in hours of forgetfulness that Leighton had in some way saved him long ago in Mexico from the consequences of some act of his drinking hours, too rash for men of their lax laws. No one, unless it were perhaps Manuel Gonzales, knew what it had been, but all could see the absolute devotion it had won for Leighton. Of course Galbraith was likely to be missing for breakfast sometimes, and Diego would be given charge of the rancho until he came back. His absence might be a matter of several days or several weeks, it was always as long as his money lasted; but thus far he had always come back, though he confessed that in no other one state had he ever before remained more than a year at a time in his life. It was Leighton who brought him back to Hermosa.

Once he halted in his descent through the vines, and cast a sharp glance at a clump of dense growth on the right; then after a last glance back over the way he had come, he continued slowly down to the level below.

"Hello!" called Leighton, "aren't you off the trail?"

Galbraith looked up quickly, startled, alert!

"Yes, I am," he confessed. "See anybody pass down here ahead of me?"

"No," replied Leighton as they ranged their horses alongside and headed towards home. "Who are you trailing?"

"The shoe is on the other foot," replied Galbraith grimly. "I was trying to see who was trailing me."

"You!"

"Oh, some one skulking in the brush on the other side of the hill playing ghost, I think. It is the first time it has occurred in daylight and I took across the hill to head the fellow off—some crazy Mexican, I reckon. Did you see Rioz about the fencing?"

"Yes, he is at the work. Things are moving all right."

"They ought to," remarked Galbraith drily. "You've been working night and day on the Gonzales tracts since you could be lifted into a saddle."

"I didn't play square to Gonzales when I dropped it a year ago, Braith. I've got to make it as square as I can to even up—as square as I can! You know," he added, "she has come back—Delfina?"

Galbraith's face hardened, and as Leighton glanced at him, he met his comrade's blue eyes; they were hard, half closed, and strangely critical! An instant and the expression had vanished, leaving Leighton half convinced that his own eyes had deceived him. Why, even if Galbraith had chanced to hear the surmises already abroad concerning himself and Gonzales' daughter,—even then, why should Galbraith care? He was so puzzled at that swift, keen, quickly veiled glance that he did not notice Galbraith's failure to reply to the remark concerning Delfina.

Diego took their horses when they reached the corral, and at the same time handed the mail to Galbraith.

He glanced at it quickly, saw there were letters only for Leighton, and overtook him before he reached the patio.

"There's a letter from Kern County," he said; "I thought you'd want to read it before you saw her."

Leighton scrutinized the cheap envelope and the scrawling superscription on the face of it—Mr. McNeal Leighton.

"I never liked my own name so little," he remarked as he tore off the envelope. Galbraith halted, too, and leaned against the fence. He knew that just beyond there a girl had heard the approach of their horses and that she was waiting for them with the frank, eager impatience of a child, but he knew it was not he for whom she would look first.

His face was turned towards the garden and away from Leighton, but he turned at the sound of crumpling paper and an oath.

"What is it, old man?"

There was no immediate reply.

Leighton's eyes were stormy, and his hand clenched on the letter.

"It's pretty nearly hell, Braith," he said at last and tossed him the letter. "Read it if you can."

The letter was from Mrs. Harriet Watson of Kern County. It stated that Mr. Watson had requested her to answer Mr. Leighton's letter regarding their unfortunate sister, Anabelle. Mr. Watson was much bothered about the affair as he did not feel able to spend money for the sort of care Mr. Leighton was giving her, and he had to notify Mr. Leighton that her relatives could not be held accountable for expenses.

They were glad to hear she was recovering so rapidly and if any sort of position could be secured for her in Hermosa, Mr. Watson thought she would be better off there where she had found friends. For Anabelle had not seemed to take much to Kern County ways, and as Mr. Watson had a good-sized family of his own to provide for, he really could not afford to look after any one who was able to work at all. Anabelle had been kind of handy with children, and, if Mr. Leighton or his wife could get her a place as child's nurse or teacher, it would be better than nothing, and the writer would be much obliged. Of course, if no such place offered, Anabelle knew she could come back to Kern County, if she wanted,—Mr. Watson's home would always have room for his sister,—but the thing he could not be accountable for was the doctor bills. So, if Anabelle could get any position to pay for that extra expense, etc., etc.

Galbraith looked up from the letter, inquiringly.

"You did not tell them, then, that her memory was gone and——"

"I couldn't do it, Braith, I couldn't bear to put it on paper. I can't bear to speak of it. Then before the letter reached them, her memory might come back. You know that Dr. Elroy said that an operation might not be necessary; that with her returning strength, the memory might come gradually, or that a shock might bring it back in an instant. You see there are so many chances."

"Yes, I see! But these people, if she goes back to them?"

"Go back! Good God, do you think I'll let her go back?"

"N—no,—I didn't reckon you would. This woman," tapping the letter, "is just the sort to send her own grandmother to the insane department of the county poor-house if the old lady's mind failed. But there is another side to it, Mac: as soon as this vinegar plant absorbs the fact that this outfit does not contain a Mrs. Leighton——"

Leighton swore again and frowned an almost ugly smile at the ugly thought.

"Do you think for one minute I'd let that stand in the way of keeping her?" he demanded. "If a Mrs. Leighton is needed, we'll find one. A few words before Father Rey and some woman who would say 'yes'! Or what's the matter with a Mrs. Galbraith? You've ranged free long enough. Pick out the prettiest of your own girls and marry her,—that would make it all right."

Galbraith uttered a harsh, strained sort of laugh at the idea.

"So it would, so it would," he agreed, "but it would be sort of playing it low down on the other woman in the case. And it may be, you know, that it is not needed. The Señorita may wake up any day, and then——"

Leighton thrust the letter in his pocket and straightened up,

"Let us go in," he said. "She will be waiting for us."

She was not waiting. She was coming to meet them, smiling, child-like, with roses in her hair and a tall stock of the blue lily which she used as a mimic cane.

"I have been listening for you forever!" she cried, running to Leighton and clasping him by the hands. "Don Mac, why do you never stay in our own garden? Anita says you ride where there is a finer one and that you are at the señora's feet. Who is the señora? Is it true that she sent you a letter that smelled like roses? And is it to be at her feet you go away all the time? Anita says you go sometimes and stay more than one hundred nights and days, and Tia Perenza boxed Anita's ears and wished that a blister would come on her tongue."

"You must not mind Anita; she was only jesting—in fun, you know."

"She cried when Tia Perenza boxed her ears, and that was no fun!" said the girl with the same child-like directness. "But if you do go away for the hundred nights and days, will you take me with you?"

"Of course," he agreed.

"And José—oh, he laughed to-day and held to my finger and tried to bite it! Will you let me take my baby, José?"

"Certainly. How could we go without José?"

She clasped her hands about his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Then I don't care how soon we start," she said happily. "Is there a moon to-night? Can we go now?"

The two men walked on beside her with grave faces. She had no recollection of ever seeing either of them until she wakened in the Mission rancho and saw Tia Perenza knitting lace in the doorway, and beside her on the bed, a sleeping baby whom they called José Alverez.

Of the flood and all the life before it, she had no recollection whatever. When, little by little, she had grown to ask questions, Perenza was ever at her side to fall in with each childish whim, until Perenza and her much exalted Don Mac were the two engrossing characters in the girl's new world.

And Perenza grew crafty again during those days when the girl was again on her feet or able to swing in the hammock in the garden. She did not at all approve of the one week when Señor Braith in his convalescence had also closed the garden, not at least until she had listened to their long, one-sided talks, when Galbraith had told her over and over again how Don Mac had found her in the flood, how he had cared for the women and children, how he had also dragged him back to life when he was as good as dead. To these recitals Perenza would add in her turn the wonders of Don Mac's boyhood and its various hair-breadth adventures. And to all, the Señorita of the Moccasins (for the title remained her own, despite the newer name of Anabella Watson),—to all she would listen dreamily, happily, as to a series of romances in which the scenes changed but never the hero. And the whole task of every day to her became merely the waiting for sunset, the steps or the voices of the two in the patio.

And Perenza hoped much for the day when the doctor would lift that bit of bone pressing on the brain. If the hero was not entirely a fool, he would cease the rides to the Gonzales woman and sit sometimes at home in his own garden! And to that end she would thrust a blossom in the hair or the hand of the Señorita and bid her go to meet Don Mac when she heard the clatter of his horse on the road. And if by chance he entered the patio without seeing the slender figure and the waiting smile, quick alarm showed in his face and voice: and Perenza chuckled to herself at those times, and gave to herself all credit for his eager intent.

XII

MAC LEIGHTON MAKES A CONFESSION.

Yet little by little, as the days passed, the mental horizon of Miss Moccasins widened. She grew to observe and make comparisons. It might be because of her returning strength, and it might be due somewhat to Anita's fondness for gossip; at any rate, a troubled sense of her anomalous position had taken root in her mind, and her questions grew persistent and hard to answer. She must be kept free from troublesome thoughts until Dr. Elroy had quite decided she was strong enough to bear that little operation on which so much depended.

"Give her the position of governess to José," suggested Galbraith, when Leighton had called him into council on the subject. "Pay her a salary to cover all expenses, and when she does recover entirely, she will not feel under obligations. That will fix it. You've been so wrapped up in the Hermosa affairs that I did not suppose you had time to notice how decidedly the Señorita is on the mend."

Leighton smiled slightly and smoothing out an ancient map of the county, compared it with some surveys of a later date.

"You're getting almost as cranky as Perenza," he remarked as he carefully dotted portions of the map with a red pencil. "I'm getting things in order to square up all right, but I have to fight against you folks almost as hard as against Delfina's lawyers."

Galbraith frowned and, rolling a cigarette, stared comtemplatively at Leighton's profile grown sharper and thinner since his return from Mexico, and at the cheek which had lost its color during the long nights when the lamp had burned through the small hours while he bent over pen and pencil problems such as now littered his table.

"What place is that?" he asked at last, pointing with his cigarette to the old survey. "Too near the coast to belong to these tracts."

"It's a little place called 'Treasure Trove' down Santa Barbara way. It belonged to Darrett. I'm having it put in order."

"How many more?" demanded Galbraith ironically. "Can't you gather in a range or two of the Sierras, and level them in time for fall planting?"

"Oh, this is only a little cottage and a few acres. That's where I was when I ran down to the coast last week. It was only a tangle of briers, but Delfina found an old letter from Felipe's sister describing how it used to look—and that's how it is going to look again. The girl is coming out here."

"His sister! Darrett's!"

Leighton nodded, much engrossed by the surveys before him, but he looked up at Galbraith's smothered imprecations.

"Hasn't one of the family brought hell enough into this valley?" he demanded. "You—why you're working yourself half to death and spending all of your own money you can get hold of to right his wrongs. Oh, I know! And now, by God, you must feather a soft nest for another of the same breed!"

"Braith!"

"I didn't cheep so long as it was the Gonzales affairs you were squaring up. When you came home and took up the work where you had laid it down, for him, well, I hated it like poison, but I kept my tongue between my teeth. I've worked like a horse to help you, and of course I'll keep alongside till the job is finished; but just this once I am rising to state that no damned fool woman is worth it! And now if you are going to ring in a new female to sweat hides and pocketbooks for—well—you—are more different kinds of an idiot than any pipe dream could conjure up!"

"You are doing pretty well without the pipe," remarked Leighton. "This extra girl in the Hermosa isn't going to make much extra work for you."

"Me? Hell!" commented Galbraith disgustedly. "It isn't my work I'm growling about; it's the way you're slaving and the things people say of it!"

"Well, what do they say?"

"Oh, they all expect to be invited to the wedding when the year is out."

"Leave Delfina out of it!"

"I can't, and what's more, you can't! Isn't she the foundation of the whole affair? And then," he added, slowly regarding Leighton, "she might not want to be left out."

Leighton laid down the pencil and looked up.

"This work has got to be done, Braith," he said quietly. "Do you suppose your protests make it any easier, or that the ideas of the valley are likely to help me?"

"Oh, if you put it that way, I'm done, of course," groaned Galbraith. "I knew it was no use trying to fight you out of it, and I did manage to keep quiet until the sister was rung in on you, and her rancho! The sister was the last straw."

"The fact is," said Leighton, deliberately regarding him, "that you are nervous and fidgety these days, ever since you got on your feet after the flood. I thought it was the fever, but you've got no fever now."

"I guess you're right," admitted Galbraith. "I am shaky. I've tried to speak about it, but I couldn't until—Mac, what did I say when I was sick that you tried to keep the others from hearing?"

"You don't remember?"

"I remember you shaking me and saying it was the wrong time to say that and that I must not mention some name,—a woman's name! Every time I opened my eyes you were on guard, Mac. You seemed afraid of what I was saying; not afraid on your own account," he added as Leighton straightened up and looked at him, "no, dazed as I was, I felt it was for me you were on guard, and I lay there shivering with dread of the thing you were shielding me from. I didn't know what it was, and yet though I'm on my feet now, at times the dread, your dread, comes back to me!"

Still no comment from Leighton; but he was listening, and, apparently, waiting.

"We work and ride together, Mac," went on Galbraith doggedly, "but we don't talk! You won't, and I can't! What sort of wall did the fever build up, old man? For when I got on my feet the wall was there."

"You'll outgrow it," suggested Leighton quietly. "It's only a little crook on your mind like that on the Señorita's memory. That row with

Darrett about Carmenita stuck in your mind, and trying to save her from the flood, emphasized the fact. At least your tongue stuck to their names, and when you were not calling for her you were cursing him—and doing it good and loud! They were both dead. Half the valley seemed aware that you had provisions sent to old Carlotta Alverez. Yes, I know! It was all right. What I would have asked you to do if I had known how bad it was with them at the last. But you didn't stop there! You took an extra glass the day I came home and when you met Darrett on the road, your threat to kill him if he went near her again was heard and repeated. I don't know that he did go to see her, probably not; but he was found dead not long after, and even the best of your friends had to consider how far circumstantial evidence could go if it was pushed! I did not want it pushed until I had time to spare for it and I had all I could stagger under just then. That's why I stood guard when you were repeating your threats and half Hermosa with open ears to listen."

"Um! I didn't know it was so bad as that," said Galbraith, eyeing Leighton thoughtfully. "I see!" Then he gave a short mirthless laugh. "And that's why the Mexicans are trailing me—for they are! I didn't know why, but it's played the devil with my nerves! I've got into the daffy habit of listening to some one following me; several times I've almost caught him."

"Any particular 'him'?"

"No, but I seem to see Darrett's ghost every corner I turn. The place is full of the Castros! I asked one of them his name yesterday and he said he was 'Felipe's cousin.' Every black and tan of them rested on a pick or shovel to listen!—And if the sister glowers at me like the cousins!"

"Well, what will you do?"

"Oh, strike across the line somewhere. Since the flood went over me I'm losing my nerve. When you get things squared here, I'll cut loose."

"Wait until my guardianship days are over and I'll go with you."

Leighton had resumed his inspection of the surveys, and spoke quietly, without lifting his head. But Galbraith welcomed the statement with a shout and overturned a chair to grasp his hand.

"Great Scott! Do you mean it?" he demanded exultantly. "Then you are not tying up for life to the Gonzales tracts? Say! I feel as if I had found you again and you had been a long time lost. I had made up my mind you were going to slave all your life for that woman who threw you over once."

Braith watched Leighton, half expecting an angry retort. But it did not come; he only smiled without lifting his eyes from the surveys.

"She threw a good many of us over at one time or other," he remarked, "and I'm not sure but you were in the bunch. I seem to be the only one who is trying to prove he is grateful."

Galbraith swore softly and got up.

"I never was in the same territory with your 'bunch,'" he growled, "and I wish you were clear of it now."

Leighton made some notes on a sheet of paper and added up a line of figures.

"I do," persisted Galbraith. "I wish you'd break loose right now. Leave all the work to a lawyer and let us both take a run across to the old mine in Mexico.—Look here," he continued eagerly, the idea apparently growing on him as he found words, "only a little of my money is tied up—I can get most of it in a day—and I've been living like a miser since you left. You say you'll do it and I'll draw every cent any sort of a time you want to start. Sink your own money into the Gonzales tracts if you want to and get a lawyer to help you. Leave your money to talk for you and break loose. The whole Hermosa valley seems haunted lately; I could not go and leave you to face the ghosts alone."

"The ghosts have not come my way yet," observed Leighton.

Then he folded up the surveys and notes, and leaned back with a sigh half weariness, half satisfaction.

"There is the last item of expense figured up," he said, as he placed the papers carefully in the desk; "all the hard work accomplished, not a thing to do now but to hunt for the money to square them."

"Nothing but," agreed Galbraith ironically; "and that's the easy end is it?"

"The very easiest! After that there is only one, no, two reasons for which I might be held longer."

"Two? What is the first?"

"The Señorita of the Moccasins."

Galbraith turned to the window staring out across the fields. After a little he said,

"And the second?"

"The small José Alvarez Darrett." Galbraith whirled angrily at the name, but Leighton made a little gesture signifying that opinions were not to be regarded.

"They both go together, Braith. She did my work and paid a big price for it. She adores the child. It's as little as I can do to provide for them together."

"Oh," remarked the other, with a more tolerant air. "It's all right to do it for her; I'll go halves with you on that any day. I thought at first it was like that Darrett girl's rancho; I thought it was done for Darrett."

"No," said Leighton, briefly. "I am only paying my own debts."

"I wish you'd let up on all the rest, shelve the work on lawyers and cut loose."

"Can't! If you go now, you'll have to go alone."

"The devil!" muttered Galbraith. "You know I won't do that. If you stay to work, I've got to face the music, too, ghosts and all!"

Leighton made no reply, but his hand rested on Galbraith's shoulder for a moment as they stood in the doorway and then sauntered together across the patio and towards the corral.

When they had quite gone, a face appeared at the window ledge. Its owner had crouched close to the wall under the shadow of a flowering shrub. It was a dark Mexican face, and the eager eyes scanned the interior with quick, alert glances for a few moments; then the lithe figure ran crouchingly under the other windows to the corner of the building, where he stood upright and walked in a careless manner around the end of the porch and into the patio.

Leighton and Galbraith had halted, talking by the fountain.

"Yes," Leighton was saying, "I have now only the line between this and the Gonzales tracts to settle,—the water rights depend on that. And if the worst happens and I should have to sell the Mission, the lines must be settled beyond any sort of doubt. But that will only take a few weeks, perhaps only days; the whole thing is clear as glass."

Just then he noticed the Mexican, one not belonging to the rancho, leaning against the pillar of the colonnade. He might be only resting, but he looked as if listening.

"Well?" demanded Leighton, sharply.

"The Señor Williams sending me from the dam," said the young fellow, slouching forward. "A horse take sick in that dynamite wagon. The load is stop on the road. Si you can send one——"

"Yes," said Galbraith, interrupting. "Go to Diego Estrada; he'll give you the horse." Then as the fellow disappeared around the corner he turned to Leighton.

"There is a specimen," he observed. "Did you notice how he watched me while he talked to you? I never noticed this particular one before, but he is a pattern of the ghost I meant. They seem to slide around every corner and watch me with their snaky black eyes till I'd like to wring their necks!"

"Have patience one more month, Braith," said Leighton quietly, "and I'll be free to help you."

The strange Mexican had only ridden a short distance when he saw old Luigo ahead of him in the road. At sound of the galloping horse the old man had evidently been disconcerted, and his attitude suggested flight; but, as he recognized the rider, his hands flew up in joyous welcome, and he sank to the ground in the shade of an immense thorn tree by the wayside, fairly hugging himself in a spasm of delight, and mumbling prayers.

"Hi, Tio Luigo! It is a good day's work, this one!" cried the younger man, waving his hand. "Mother of God! What have I heard! It is true, all you say about the Americans. He did it! He is followed by the ghost! I heard him confess with these two ears!"

The old man straightened quickly and sat open-mouthed staring on the ground.

"They have not taken him till I give the word?" he gasped; "no one doing that! Tell me, is it so?"

"No," said the young fellow,—and Luigo again muttered most voluble thanks to his special saints. "No, it is at Don Mac's own house I hear it. Don Mac he say he help keep the ghost off Señor Braith if he stay, so I guess he go to stay some more weeks and we catch him! I hear him say how the valley is full of the ghost what looks like Don Felipe!"

Luigo suddenly fell to hugging himself again and chuckling. Then he scrambled to his feet with surprising agility and darted to the spreading buckthorn.

"The ghost!" he called contemptuously. "How these American judges care for ten hundred ghosts? Not any at all! They say to bring solid things! It is good you hear of the ghost, but that no is solid at all, Miguel. It is not," he added, as he scrambled out from the deep shadows of the buckthorn, "it is not like this!"

He had dragged from the clustering limbs above his head a bundle which he shook out triumphantly before the puzzled Miguel.

"It is his own! I found it—I!—in the room where he sleeps. All his clothes on the wall! Look!" and he fished in one of the pockets and drew out part of a woman's comb. "Carmenita's! It was in the adobe. I found the other half beside Felipe. And, see! Here is a letter in the American. You spell Americano?"

"Me, I learn all that in the school," said Miguel, eyeing the note dubiously, "but it is so long back."

"Read!" demanded Luigo, unfolding the note nervously. "I know it—that paper! It is so thick, so heavy, all with that mark of the silver palm in the corner,—that paper belong to the Hacienda and no place else! And it is writing to Braith,—no?"

"It is to no name," said Miguel at last. "It is just 'Mi Amigo'."

"Ah-ha! Amigo! Go on. How you spell it?"

His old hands were tremulous with eagerness as he shook Miguel's arm to hasten the reading.

"Mi Amigo:

"It is not easy to discuss our affairs before your friend, who is an enemy. You and I must not be estranged because of evil things people tell you. Do me the favor to hear my side of the story and meet me at five o'clock at the old adobe in the west vineyard. I can make all settlements clear. It is for us two to talk, not for others to know. That is why I do not say your house or mine; the adobe is the best. FELIPE."

"Ai—zi!—Felipe—Felipe—Felipe!" cried the old man dismally, shaking his head and moaning. But a moment later victory superseded the grief in him as he kissed the folded paper and knelt in the dust by the roadside.

"From Heaven Felipe come back this day to lead me into that room, to shut the eyes of the people, that no one sees when I go and when I come out. My life to God from the day when the Americano dies as my Felipe dies, my life to God and the Mother of God!"

XIII

THE SENORITA GOES DRIVING.

Fate was abroad in the Hermosa that morning. It was a fair, sunny day and the soft breeze carried the odor of blossoming orchards. The pink and white petals drifted downward on the Señorita in the garden, where she swung gently back and forwards in the hammock, touching the ground now and then with a gorgeous moccasin—a day-old gift from Galbraith—and crooning one of Anita's lullabies to small José Alverez.

"You spoil him si you rock him after he is asleep!" said Anita; "I will take him to the crib." But the girl shook her head.

"No! He sleeps but with me, and you are jealous, Anita. You go to your dinner. José and I want our garden all to our own selves!"

With slight demur Anita joined the other servants and ranchmen in the big refectory. And thus it was that the way through the garden was open to Miguel—and others!

The Señorita left the hammock and was slowly pacing the long path bordered on both sides by stately white lilies reaching almost to her waist. Their clusters of white buds had not yet unfolded, and the girl in the simple linen gown, bought ready made in Santa Barbara, and a white lace mantilla, the pride of Perenza's heart, looked herself like a folded blossom, a sister to the unawakened lilies. The one incongruous touch was the string of turquoise with its scarlet tie, and the very beautifully-made moccasins in which she took the delight of a child.

José had wrinkled up his small face as a direct ray of sunlight sifted through the moving branches, and the Señorita had stepped aside into the deeper shadows when the soft roll of wheels sounded on the drive along the old olive orchard. All the days the Señorita had lived in the garden, no one had driven there. It only ended in a loop by the garden gate and was for company—so Anita said—and no company had yet come that way. The men came direct from the main road and past the corrals on the other side.

So the girl stood very still, very close to the bole of a palm near the gate. The wheels were too close for her to retreat unless she ran, and to run would awaken José, and the Señorita would have risked much to avoid that.

She stood still as the tree itself as a very elegant phaeton rolled over the grass-grown drive, slowing up perceptibly as it neared the gate. Old Luigo was driving. The Señorita had only seen him at a distance and recognized his wide brimmed hat by the black band around it. She remembered him as the man who brought the sweet smelling notes Perenza hated so.

But beside him was some one more wonderful than the Señorita had yet seen in the Hermosa valley,—or was it because of the wonderful way in which her maid had arranged the filmy black hat that the blonde face with its pale hair shone like a jewel set in ebony?

The carriage fittings, the horses, the harness, were all dead, dead black! A basket of ferns and wild flowers was the only bit of color in the equipage and the woman leaned across the basket to peer more closely into the old garden.

"Slower, Luigo! If you see any one of them, stop. If not, drive on. You are sure she is in the garden these days?"

"Sure! But no one gets near her. She was in the orchard with Anita, yesterday."

A little laugh sounded from the carriage.

"So great a treasure should not range so far!"

The Señorita pressed closely to the palm tree, and then it was that small José proved her undoing, for unconsciously she clasped him more tightly and, his sleep interrupted, he made vocal protest.

As the girl realized that she was discovered, she stepped back into the path, patting and rocking the little rebel into slumber again. The carriage halted at the gate only a few paces away, and

Luigo, at a word from the lady, clambered down on the opposite side and adjusted a loosened strap.

The Señorita did not notice him. Her eyes were busy with the lady, who smiled, and held out her hand, and spoke in a carefully sweet manner.

"Did my horses waken the child? I am so sorry! May I see him?" Then as the girl slowly approached and lifted the *rebozo,* "Oh, how pretty it is!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," assented the girl, eagerly. "I think he is as pretty as the flowers. But Don Mac laughs when I say so! Don't you think he is? Look at his hands, and his feet,—oh, you should see his feet!"

"Whose child is it?" asked the other; and the girl stroked the babe's hand softly.

"He is mine—all my own—always!" she replied with much satisfaction. "Don Mac says I shall always keep him, and he is so good—Don Mac! What he says is always true. Perenza says he is the whole Hermosa valley and the mountains back of them!"

"Of course," assented her listener with a queer little smile. "And may I ask your name?"

"I am the 'Señorita'!" she said frankly, "except when I am Anabella Watson. That is my real name, but no one calls me it."

"So," said the visitor, rather amused at the girl's frank statements. "This is your child, and you are the Señorita?"

"Señorita Moccasins," she said, lifting her skirt and thrusting forward one bead-covered foot. "Señor Braith calls me 'Miss Moccasins,' but all the Californians call me 'Señorita'."

This time the lady in the carriage did more than smile,—she laughed outright.

"Oh, yes, I've heard of you from Señor Leighton,—a school teacher, I think he said." And she laughed outright at the way he had tried to trick her,—and had failed!

Her red lips thinned as she considered how best to prove to him his failure and for once confound the so perfect Don Mac, who always, always said only the truth, and never, never made mistakes as did other men!

Her foot was on the step to descend; she would walk through the garden with his "school teacher" and the school teacher's infant! She would meet him at his own door; she would——

But a better thought occurred to her and she sank back on the cushions.

"I am a friend of your Don Mac, and I came to call on business," she said, smiling. "But the day is really too perfect for the indoors. Will you not come for a little drive, Señorita?—you and the little one?" she added, engagingly.

"To drive with you! Oh, how much I should like!" And the girl's face flushed happily as a child's at the little attention. "But it would never, never do. Perenza would scold."

"Nonsense! Don Mac would not let her scold us just for giving the baby a little ride. We shall be back before she misses you."

"José never did have a carriage ride yet," said the Señorita, wistfully.

"And I am quite sure it will do him good," said her temptress, promptly.

That settled it. A moment later the Señorita was seated in the carriage and her hostess was gathering up the lines briskly.

"You will have to borrow a horse from Señor Leighton to ride home, Luigo," she remarked as she turned the team deftly, and the old man sprang out of the way.

As the white *rebozo* was caught by the breeze and blown from about the girl's face, the old man uttered an exclamation of amazement and stared after the Señorita and the child with puzzled eyes and incredulous mutterings. Then he opened the garden gate and made his way towards the house. The patio was empty, the servants in the refectory, and all the dwelling open for the inspection of the curious.

The Señorita opened her eyes in wonder at the speed of the black ponies, and sought the eyes of José for approval of their escapade; but José had retreated into slumber once more.

"It almost—takes my breath!" she confessed. "To ride so fast as this,—does it never frighten you—señorita?"

She added the last hesitatingly, not liking to ask the name of her new-found friend, yet slightly embarrassed that she did not know it.

"Señora," corrected the other one. "You are the *Señorita* of the party." Then she turned her eyes full on the girl with a keener inquiry.

"How is it you gasp at this little drive after riding El Diablo and making a record?" she demanded, curtly.

"I ride El Diablo—I?"

The señora twitched the lines impatiently,—was the girl a fool, or was she acting? Her consternation seemed very real.

"Certainly—El Diablo—the devil!" And she laughed briefly. "Are you not the heroine of the flood?"

The girl only stared at her in a perplexed way, a deep wrinkle between her brows. Was she? The question bordered closely on that dreamland of which she caught fleeting, troubled glimpses, but of which the doctor and Don Mac had forbidden her to think lest it bring back the pain in her head. She had been guarded more carefully than

José himself, that her every hour might be tranquil. No one was allowed to approach or question her, and now all in a moment that was all changed.

The swift flight in the beautiful carriage with Don Mac's friend, to run away and be back before any one could miss her,—that was delightful! But the question of the gracious, smiling señora was different; it made her think and she clasped her hand over her brow and tried hard, hard to remember if such a wonderful thing could have been possible.

Diablo, whom the boys of the stable avoided! Diablo, who would stand on his hind feet and dance with rage! Diablo, who could overleap the carriage itself and never touch it! Diablo, whose approach would fill her with terror! How, how could it be that she had ever ridden him any time, any where?

"I have been ill—I can't remember much," she said at last. "But I never, never could have ridden Diablo. Of all horses he frightens me the most."

"And of all men—Don Mac?" suggested the señora, with a little malicious glance lost on the girl.

"Don Mac! How could I be afraid of him? He is—he is wonderful! Perenza tells me of the saints, but I am sure he is greater than they, and I know it is easier to love him!"

"Ah!"

Again the señora looked at her curiously. For reasons connected with a sensual Dutch mother and a Mexican father, whose household at times had suggested a harem,—because of those memories and an inherited comprehension of them, the señora believed in the innocence of girlhood only so long as it was guarded.

And this girl, who had guarded her but Mac Leighton and an old woman who was his alone? And this child in her arms, which she showed with pride and acknowledged with pride as her own! It was all the most natural thing in the world, of course. In fact, if she had discovered some such episode in Leighton's life a year before, she might not have eloped with Felipe, it was barely possible she might not. But she knew men, and Leighton had been too self-restrained, too sure of himself and of her. He had never aroused her imagination, only her curiosity for a time.

Of course she took it for granted there was some other woman somewhere, and now that she had found her, she was not troubled by delicacy of feeling as to letting him know she knew it. She meant to take the girl to the Hacienda and detain her till Leighton should come or send for her,—she was curious to see which it would be. That would help determine just how much hold the girl had on all too perfect Don Mac! Would he send a servant? his right hand, Galbraith? Or would he have the assurance to come himself?

The señora's mother in the same situation would have taken the affair as a great joke, and with loud laughs would have insisted on being godmother to the child! The mother had been an exuberant, rosy cheeked creature whose mouth had upturned corners to match the jolly upturned nose. There was a strong resemblance between them in some ways, but the daughter was a limited edition. Her mouth had a downward, jealous turn, and a certain curve of malice in the thin red lips. Her instincts were no finer, but they were covered with a more delicate veneer. The daughter wore laces and emeralds while the mother, before the golden American days and her meeting with Gonzales, had worn wooden shoes.

The biography of a thought! All the inherited instincts of adventurous forbears in the tropics framed the thought the señora expressed by a single exclamation,—ah!

She had no standard with which to compare a child-like love in the heart of a woman, and no belief that any man would care to foster such an emotion. As child and as girl she had known men, some of them old friends of her mother's, and she knew!

"Yes, he certainly is handsome enough to turn any girl's head," she said at last. "Mac is all right. But after all he is only a man, and men have a way of forgetting—señoritas."

"Forgetting—oh!" And the little cry of protest was fraught with sharp pain as she put out her hand in a pleading, appealing way. "You cannot mean that, señora, that he could forget me! It is very terrible to forget. He cannot forget when I shall be always with him, always beside him, always loving him!"

"You talk like a simpleton," said the señora with a curt laugh. The utter childishness of the girl irritated and annoyed her. She could not of course be jealous of a señorita who was a mother. As a Mexican woman, she expected episodes of that sort; they would never disturb her in the slightest. The commotion these Californians made over that little peasant, Carmenita, was annoying and senseless to her. But this one was a different type from Carmenita, this one who showed her child with pride and avowed her love unashamed.

"How can you be always beside him unless you are his wife?" asked the señora as a final shot, regarding the girl keenly. At that question she would surely show shame, perhaps blushes.

There was neither. The girl looked puzzled for a moment and shook her head.

"I do not know about that," she said slowly. "But—I will be his wife if—if——"

"If you ask him and he says yes!" laughed the señora. "And we will all be asked to the wedding when Señor Don McNeal Leighton of Hermosa marries Miss Moccasins of—No Man's Land!"

"Yes!" assented the girl, laughing also. "Let us turn around quickly and go to ask him! Oh, how good you are. I am so happy that you told me!"

For the first time the truth dawned upon the señora that this girl was not quite as other people. A swift fear struck her as she looked in the eager smiling face. Was it an idiot she had picked up at his gate in order that he should be discomfited?

No thought of Leighton was in her mind now, only a wild desire to meet some one, any one, on the road; a wild dread of sitting alone beside that strange creature with the childish smile and the brain no arrow point of sense could reach. But there was no one in sight. Her own gates were only a short distance around the bend. To reach her own people and reach them quickly was the only thought in her chilled little heart, and with that thought uppermost she reached for the whip.

The girl laughed as the ponies leaped forward, but an instant later she uttered a cry of alarm and caught the señora's wrist.

"We are not going to him!" she half moaned in dismay. "You are taking me farther away! Oh, señora, take me back now—at once! I must ask him to marry me before I forget it again. It is so awful to forget!"

The señora stared at her with whitened face and tried to wrench her wrist free to lash the galloping ponies. But at the first violent movement the girl's eyes glowed darkly. With a sharp cry, she wrenched the *rebozo* from her head, and, wrapping it about the awakened child, she deliberately laid him on the soft rug of the carriage between her feet.

"Now," she said grimly, "we are going back to Don Mac Leighton's to ask him to marry Miss Moccasins of No Man's Land!"

In vain the señora screamed and clung to the lines. They had reached the gates. The gardeners were mowing the lawn near the house. If she could only reach them! could only turn the horses out of the main road!

The horses turned of their own accord to the gates that swung open to let them in and swung shut again with a clang as the wheels crossed the spring bar in the drive.

At the sound the girl turned her head. She saw the gates closed,—she was trapped! shut in forever from Don Mac, from the road to the Mission! With a half scream, she darted down on the señora like a hawk on a black and yellow oriole.

The men started to run when they heard the scream of their señora. They could see her for a moment swaying in the grasp of the girl and then sink fainting in the bottom of the carriage, while the girl, standing erect, grasped the lines and strove in vain to check the course of the now maddened ponies dashing along the drive.

A shout from one of the men was disastrous in that it caused her to notice that they were running from different directions, closing in on her as the gates had closed, shutting off forever the way to Don Mac!

Her face was white with dread of them, and with a last despairing effort she threw all her weight on the lines to check them, to turn them again to the road, out of the reach of those men, those awful men, who were so close now, so awfully close!

The ponies reared, swerved, and the next instant there was a chorus of shouts, a crash and then three men were cutting the traces to free the ponies from the over-turned carriage, and two women were lying very still on the green of the lawn.

XIV

MISS MOCCASINS REVEALS HER IDENTITY.

The unconsciousness of the señora was due to fright and to nothing worse was due the hysterical fit she indulged in later. Dr. Elroy arrived within an hour to put plaster on the scratch on her chin and to assure her she was as sound as ever, a fact which she did not credit in the least, so assured was she that her nervous system would become a complete wreck as a result of the shock.

"And that maniac! oh, her terrible eyes! Mac Leighton should be prosecuted for allowing her to range at large like that; she is horribly dangerous!"

"Not at this moment," returned the doctor, carefully folding some filmy powders. "I put her asleep as soon as I came."

"Oh, you saw her first?" inquired the señora with a slightly injured expression.

"Couldn't help it," he said briefly. "Your people had laid her in the outer court, and if it had been dark I should have stumbled over her. After dressing the slight injury to her head, I had her laid in the sala. I have also sent for Mr. Leighton. This is a case in which we are both especially interested."

"Indeed?"

"Yes," resumed the doctor, not noticing the irony in her tone. "A most peculiar case; not an unbalanced mind, you understand, only an entire loss of memory. A lost personality you might say. I am expecting decided results from this accident, for by a strange coincidence, it is the same side of the head which is again injured."

"I suppose her baby was simply killed?"

"Her——" began the doctor; and then, thinking it best not to enter into the question of the child's parentage with Mrs. Darrett, since it might cause a relapse into the hysterics, he added: "No, he was not even thrown out of the carriage; the rug only turned over him. But the servants were pretty nearly useless with fright; they huddled around him like scared sheep."

"Luigo is coming," said Ana, the maid, looking from the window. "He will manage them. And some one else is riding through the gate—two gentlemen."

The señora raised herself on the couch and surveyed the driveway for an instant and then sank among the cushions with a laugh not musical.

"I wondered if he would come or send a servant," she confessed. "He not only comes, but his shadow, Señor Braith, rides with him."

"There is another," announced Ana a little later, pointing to a figure bobbing along in the rear.

"That—I think is Anita, the nurse," decided the doctor. And the señora laughed again and asked if she, an uninvited guest, would be allowed to attend the reception Miss Moccasins was holding in her sala?

It was all ridiculous,—the "Señorita" and that incongruous baby and those men riding like that for such a creature, a girl in a ready made gray linen thing and those ridiculous moccasins! It pleased her to dwell on the grotesque things connected with the girl who had almost frightened the wits out of her: Mac Leighton should be humbled before he was an hour older!

And Ana's fingers fairly flew in order that the señora should look her very best in a soft clinging home gown with wonderful jet girdle and glimmer of beads. Even the slippers she asked for were beaded to the tips.

"Beaded shoes are just now the fashion in the Hermosa," she remarked, jestingly.

Old Luigo was in the sala crouched beside the couch and peering into the sleeping girl's face when Dr. Elroy entered and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" he demanded; and

Luigo slowly rose to his feet, pointing with trembling hand to the girl.

"Who—who is she?"

"The young lady from Kern County, who warned the people of the flood. You heard of that?"

"We had other things to think of here," said the old man, as he slowly moved away from the couch.

The doctor noted her pulse and looked at his watch with considerable satisfaction.

"Perfectly normal," he murmured, seating himself with his open watch in his hand, "and time for her to wake up."

Leighton and Galbraith arrived a moment later and halted at the entrance to the court.

"I'll be here if I'm wanted. Mrs. Darrett might not like——"

"Nonsense! Delfina is not of the Castro faction—and—and we may need you!"

Galbraith followed without further comment, and as they entered the sala, Delfina was descending the stairway from the other side. Leighton went directly to the couch, and Galbraith, though he halted farther off, had eyes for no one but the girl lying there. It was not until Mrs. Darrett had crossed half the room that he noted her presence and acknowledged it by a grave bow.

Leighton and the doctor had their backs to her, and she felt irritated anew that the girl there absorbed all eyes, even those of old Luigo who crouched against the wall as if fascinated.

"Is she badly injured?" asked Leighton, grasping the doctor's hand. "We were searching for her when the message came. Is she——"

"She was stunned by the fall. I can tell you neither what I hope nor what I fear until she wakens."

"Oh! She is only sleeping then? I feared ——" He sat down, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. Dr. Elroy regarded him sharply.

"Sick yourself, aren't you?" he demanded. "No? Well, I'm not so sure of that. You've been losing weight and color too for a month. Just now you looked decidedly white around the gills. Been riding hard?"

"Yes," said Galbraith; "that's it."

"How did it happen?" asked Leighton, who felt the color come into his face at Galbraith's words. For Galbraith was obviously trying to cover his emotion at sight of her death-like face! "They told us it was an accident in a carriage—a carriage! That seemed so incredible!"

"So does this," said Delfina pointing to the little patch of court plaster on her white chin. "After this, Don Mac, you must really tack labels on your maniacs! I had no idea when she wanted a carriage ride that she meant to murder me for the use of the ponies."

"Maniac! Delfina!"

"A loss of memory was the only trouble until to-day—an hour ago!" said Dr. Elroy. "If any tendency towards insanity has developed so recently, the question is, what caused it? A mental shock of any sort?"

"Please tell us, Delfina, just what happened."

"She got in my carriage with the baby at your gate. She insisted on driving. I thought her manner strange and objected. Then she fought like a tiger for the lines and when she got them she overturned the carriage. The servants will have to tell you what happened after that."

As she glanced carelessly at her listeners, she met Galbraith's gaze and felt a flush of anger she dared not show, for she perceived he did not believe her.

"But, Delfina," persisted Leighton, "we have known her as a gentle, harmless child. What was done or said to change her in the few moments she was with you?"

"A gentle, harmless child!" repeated Delfina, mockingly. "Which one, Don Mac, the mother or the infant?"

"The—mother?" ejaculated Leighton. "That girl!—You don't mean——"

She could see that the man was staring at her in curious amazement. It angered her to detect a critical tinge in the doctor's regard.

"Nonsense!" she said, shrugging her shoulders. "What should I mean? Your protégés and their families are nothing to me, but when bachelors and girls of this age disdain the conventionalities too far, people will talk, you know!"

"Appearances have misled you, Mrs. Darrett. You fancied this girl the mother of the child she carried?"

"She told me it was hers!"

"As a pet bird would be yours!" And try as he would Leighton could not keep the anger from his tones. "She had no idea of the false construction to be placed on her claim to it."

"That is quite true, Mrs. Darrett, she is too child-like to understand."

"Oh—very well! She has champions at least! I wonder——" and she looked at Leighton daringly—"if she is too child-like to comprehend marriage?"

"Marriage?"

"Yes. She told me among other things that she meant to marry you. Is that also a mistake, or can we offer congratulations?"

The men stared at her. Galbraith swore under his breath and did not dare look at Leighton.

"Oh, Mrs. Darrett!" began the doctor.

"What the girl said in that brief mental aberration should not——"

"Thank you, doctor," said Leighton with stern decision. "But if our little girl recovers—if she recovers—there must be no further chance for misunderstanding my care of her. The marriage will certainly be a fact if she continues in the same state of mind, and," he added, turning to Delfina, "I should consider myself a lucky man!"

She stared at him in amazement for a moment, and then laughed.

"A California Quixote! Now, Mac, be reasonable! You are certainly not in earnest! You don't mean to turn the Old Mission into a private insane asylum or——"

"Delfina!—Don't!" he said half in appeal and half in command. "It is not a subject for jest. She was injured doing my work. If she remains helpless, I shall take care of her. If she recovers, I shall just as certainly ask her to be my wife!"

His words were emphatic, and so was his movement, as he suddenly lifted the hand of the sleeping girl and pressed it to his lips.

Delfina retreated with a little gasp that was half fear, for at his close clasp and decided tones the girl opened her eyes as she had done that first day at the Mission when unresponsive to the others.

Luigo sank on his knees mumbling frightened prayers. Galbraith alone stood as before with folded arms, back of all the others. In more ways than one he seemed outside of the circle.

Dr. Elroy bent forward, looking keenly in the girl's face.

"Well? You are better?" he said cheerily. And she lifted drowsy eyes to his for an instant, eyes even in their drowsiness showing surprise.

"Why—yes," she said at last as she turned her gaze slowly towards the others in the room, and, passing over them lightly, settled it on the man who held her hand.

"Yes—I——" She passed her hand confusedly over her eyes, and then uttered a little cry of comprehension. "Oh! Did I faint when the wave struck! And were they saved?—oh—were they?"

Dr. Elroy turned to the others in triumph.

"Yes, dear," said Leighton, gently, "you fainted; but it is all right now that you are yourself again." And both his hands clasped hers with grateful fervor.

"Dear," she repeated in a bewildered way, while the color crept into her cheeks and she regarded him for a moment with shy wonder, "I must be half asleep yet, for I seem to know you so well, so very well, yet—I can't remember."

"Try!" he said in the same gentle tone that had yet a command in it. "When you are quite awake it will all come back to you."

"Oh—yes! It does,—it does!" she breathed eagerly. "The ride, the beautiful ride on Diablo, Diablo the magnificent! And then the water, the terrible roar of the water! And the old woman who screamed! And"—with eyes suddenly turned on Leighton with stony directness—"You! It was you who tried to stop me! It was you who said it was Phil's fault, my Felipe's! It was you—you!"

"Your Felipe!"

Delfina's voice broke in sharply and Leighton half rose from the chair and let the girl's hand fall, only to grasp it again closely, almost roughly.

"What do you know of Felipe?" he demanded. His voice had lost its gentle tones,—it was rough, harsh, compelling! "This is his home and—this is his wife!"

"Oh, Delfina?" said the girl turning interestedly to the rigid black draped figure. "It's a funny way to come home, isn't it? Where's Phil?"

Delfina drew back with a frightened gasp.

"The Señorita!" muttered Luigo, nodding his head. "I knew it! The Señorita!"

The rest stared at each other, and the old Mexican nodded his head and muttered. The girl, hearing his voice, turned her head and smiled a little.

"You see I came back to California, Luigo," she remarked, and then grew suddenly conscious of the strained attitude of the others and the dismay in the face of the widow.

"What is the matter?" she demanded sharply. "Why do you look so strangely? Why—why do none of you speak to me?" She raised herself on her elbow, though she winced from a lame shoulder, and swayed a little dizzily. "My head is rather muggy, yet, but I can see you all, and I would like a reply to my question,—Where is Phil? Delfina!"—in sudden terror—"That black dress! Is it—is it——"

"It is you who must answer a question first," said Leighton tensely: "What was Felipe to you?"

"My brother, of course!" she said, staring at him in surprise.

Delfina uttered a little scream and then began to laugh in an hysterical way.

Leighton's face could scarcely grow whiter, but it changed its tense, eager expression for a colorless acceptance of facts, and he dropped her hand with a slight cold bow.

"Then you are?"

"I am Anchor Darrett of 'Treasure Trove,' she answered briefly. "Now, who are you and where is Phil?"

In the shock of silence following the girl's words, Dr. Elroy cast a meaning glance at the others, and again it was Galbraith who came to the rescue.

"Your brother is away just now Miss—Miss Darrett." (Ah! the discarded Miss Moccasins of the days past!) "The fact is you've been unconscious since the flood, could not even tell your own name. Nobody knew you, and that's why you find all Hermosa sort of tongue-tied when you—when you come to us."

"Oh, is that it?" she said slowly, looking at the speaker in a puzzled way, and then turning her glance on the old Mexican. "But Luigo, Luigo could have told you!"

"Luigo did not see you until a few minutes ago," broke in the doctor, eager to distract her attention from her original question. "You were carried to this gentleman's house from the flood and you have been ill longer than you realize. I am your physician and must forbid further conversation for to-day. Mrs. Darrett, I think I must prescribe retirement for you both. You have by no means recovered from your over—indisposition."

At that Delfina came forward. Overwhelmed as she was by the situation, she realized that the only thing to be done was to accept it and follow the lead of Galbraith and the doctor. If the girl was at last sane, Delfina had not the least desire to add any further shock by which a repetition of the carriage scene might be evolved;—and Felipe's death must not be spoken of.

One look at Luigo had convinced her there was no mistake this time in the girl's identity. In the garden of the Old Mission, with her head wreathed in a *rebozo* and a child in her arms, he had thought his memory and his old eyes had played him false tricks. But once close to her, face to face, he had no further doubts, and Delfina knew and accepted the fact. In the presence of those men who had listened to her ridicule of the girl, it was no easy matter to act as though they already had forgotten it, or to go forward and do the only thing to be done. But with a deprecating glance at the doctor,—she avoided looking toward Leighton, who had retreated to a window,—and squaring her shoulders for the effort, she held out her hand to the girl.

" We will try to make up for lost time, Anchor," she said with a little smile. " It isn't our fault if you visited our neighbor first. What have you to say for yourself for not writing us you were coming? "

" Oh, I forget," said the girl on the couch, her eyes studying wistfully the blonde face, and drawing Delfina down to the hassock, vacated by Leighton a moment before, she added, "I think it was because I was so eager to get back and I wanted to surprise you!"

"I reckon," remarked Galbraith, "that you pretty nearly succeeded."

Delfina and Dr. Elroy laughed, glad to laugh at anything and relieve the tension they were all conscious of. And the laughter even gave Delfina courage to lean forward and kiss the girl's cheek; until now the greeting given Felipe's sister had lacked the cordiality of their exchanged letters. And Anchor Darrett smiled back at her, with no disquieting memory of their struggle behind the plunging horses, and no consciousness that the rather becoming diffidence of her brother's wife was due in part to terror, terror of herself, harmless though she looked at the awakening from her weeks of oblivion.

"Come and shake hands, Luigo," commanded the girl, smiling quizzically at the old man. "You stare at me as if I were a ghost. Come and see that I am not. Oh," as Luigo looked questioningly at the doctor, "to shake hands won't make me any sicker. Not that I feel sick at all, but my shoulder hurts, and my head a little."

Luigo came forward, made an antiquated bow and took the hand she offered.

"You are welcome in California, Anchor," he said with careful precision, causing Anchor to laugh.

"But you can't cross your heart and say you are glad," she said. "You were gladder far when they packed me away to school and you had Felipe all to yourself. How I used to torment you! and how you used to threaten me! I forgive you, though. I'd forgive anybody who was devoted to Felipe." The old man had moved back, smiling grimly with the others at her quizzical reminders; but at her final words he stepped close to the couch and clasped her hand in both his own.

"Mother of God! I am glad you are here, Doña Anchor, glad from the heart! Yes, we forgive each other everything—all the time—and we both devote to Felipe!"

"Luigo," said Doña Delfina warningly, "you will have many days to prove your devotion, but to-day—"

"Yes, to-day the audience is ended," said Dr. Elroy in a half jesting way. But Luigo understood and quietly slipped out of the room.

Leighton picked up his hat, preparatory to leaving, but Delfina, with a little murmured apology to Anchor, crossed the sala and caught his hand with a fierce little grip.

"Don't you dare go, Mac Leighton!" she said hurriedly under her breath, her eyes still on the girl beside whom the doctor had seated himself, testing pulse, temperature, and the strange little wound on the skull, which had acted as a door locking up reason, and again letting it free at a jar. "Don't you dare go!" repeated Delfina. "Feel my hands. I'm shaking with nervousness. Do you think I could sleep in the house alone with her? Not if she were Felipe's sister ten times over! My! Your hands are cold as ice; has she scared you, too?"

"A little," he confessed trying to smile, and not succeeding very well. "But it's nonsense about your being alone with servants all about you."

"What good would they do if she took another fractious fit? They would only go to praying. Dr. Elroy can't stay, not at night anyway, and you must."

"I can't," he said decidedly. "It's no use talking, Delfina. When she was helpless and homeless, the case was different, but now that she is where she belongs, you will have to look after her,—I'm out of it."

"Oh dear!" cried Delfina, sinking helplessly into a seat. "You won't stay even for me?"

"Can't," he said briefly, thrusting the icy hands she had referred to in his pockets.

"Nor for her?" And her smile was not untinged by malice.

"Nor for her."

"Yet, an hour ago you would have married her."

"To save her from feminine slander, yes."

"How was I to know? A strange girl in your garden, who said she was going to live with you always, and that she loved you better than the saints,—yes, that's what she said," laughed Delfina with a wary eye on the couch,—"so how was I to know? But you hate me for it," she said, sitting suddenly, accusingly erect, "you hate me for thinking what any rational woman would have thought."

"I don't love you for it," he confessed, "or the other rational women either. I suppose," he added, regarding the doctor and his patient, "I suppose she will be a rational woman, too, when she gets on her feet."

"The saints grant it," murmured Delfina devoutly. "But, oh Mac, how—how—how am I to let her know about Felipe? You can see the doctor wants her kept in ignorance of it as long as possible, and if it had not been for Galbraith,—well, he saved the day when the rest of us lost our wits!"

Leighton glanced across at Galbraith, who had seated himself in the court just outside the entrance to the sala, but in full view in case he should be wanted.

"That's so," he remarked reflectively, "he did;

and he always will if he is given a half chance. He would be the best person you could get to remain here until you are convinced that your new guest is 'rational'."

"But would he do it?"

"Yes, if you tell him it is for the Señorita."

"Ah!" And again Delfina's smile had its little sting of ridicule—"both of you!" But she caught his sleeve as he would have turned away.

"No, you can't go that way," she declared. "You've helped me into this trouble and you must help me out."

Without reply he walked with her across the sala.

"Doctor," said Delfina, "I want my sister to meet the man who has been her—her guardian since the flood! It is our neighbor, Mr. Leighton, Anchor. He has been, he is, a friend of Felipe's."

Anchor Darrett turned almost eagerly at the last words, but faced the man who had held her hand and called her "dear" when she awakened; and a little wrinkle of troubled thought grew between her eyes as she regarded him. "The doctor says I must not think about the flood, or—or anything unpleasant just yet, but I've an impression that we almost quarreled that evening in the cañon, and I suppose we should have done so if the flood had allowed us."

"You have plenty of time now," said Dr. Elroy, genially, " but I can't allow any quarrels until you are out of my hospital. After that—you can go at each other with little axes, and I'll be umpire! "

" Miss Darrett will find me the most peaceable of warriors at her command."

" And you are Don Mac Leighton," she said slowly, looking from him to Delfina, as the gossip of the stage recurred to her at the mention of the name. This, then, was the man her brother had won a bride from! This was the autocrat of the Hermosa valley! " It was your horse I coaxed from the Mexican? You are the owner of El Diablo? "

" I have the pleasure, until you have further use for him."

" That sounds very nice and very much like California," she said, regarding him more graciously. " I have no remembrance of your guardianship, but I did love your El Diablo. He gave me my first real welcome home! "

" I am going your way, Leighton," said Dr. Elroy, appearing with his hat and gloves. " No medicine for either of you ladies, but you are both to take a nap. And you in particular, Señorita, are not to talk, even a little bit, until I call this evening about, well,—between six and seven. Mrs. Darrett, put a double guard at her door, if necessary, to enforce this command. I depend on you. Now, Leighton, if you and Galbraith are ready—"

"Just a moment, Doctor," said Leighton; "I think Galbraith will remain here."

"Good, very good!" said Dr. Elroy approvingly. But Delfina was quite certain she heard a subdued oath from Galbraith in the court, and hastened to the rescue.

"You will stay, won't you?" she pleaded hurriedly. "Somebody must! The Mexicans are not fit to trust her with if she should—should really need care. As for me, I am almost prostrated over the whole chaotic muddle. And the fear of what she will do when she hears he is dead,—that is the very worst of all to face now! Somebody must watch her, guard her, lie to her if necessary."

Galbraith looked at Leighton and something in the latter's face decided him more than the words of persuasion.

"All right: if the Señorita needs me, of course."

But he avoided Delfina's glance and gave brief heed to her thanks.

"We all have to suffer for our own sins sooner or later," he observed, "so I'm ready to commence on my account."

And Luigo, sitting under the oleander beside the weeping Anita, heard him and made mental note of the confession.

Anita, bewildered, almost afraid to return home to Perenza, sat listening to the wonderful discovery that their beloved Señorita of the Moccasins was as one dead to the life of the people of the Mission. Even Don Mac she did not remember! How, then, could she recall Perenza, whose *rebozo* she wore? or Anita? or even José ever again?

And as Anita heard, she wept above the sleeping José and hated the man who told her, but could not doubt him, especially when Don Mac came out looking very strange and troubled and told her to take José home. The Señorita would remain with Señora Darrett.

"But how she go to sleep without José?" pleaded Anita. "Always he lay beside her a little while. Luigo he saying she forget us all. But si she once get a look at her José! I am so sure, Don Mac, she no forgetting him!"

Don Mac did not reply at once. His face was turned from Anita, and he was pulling on his riding gloves and smoothing them with unusual and elaborate care. When they became a blurred and indistinct vision for a moment, he dashed the back of one of them across his eyes, and pulled his hat low because of the glare of the springtime sun.

"It is no use, Anita, girl. Take José home, and comfort Perenza. The Señorita Darrett does not remember any of us."

And it was quite true, for as Galbraith gave his arm to Anchor Darrett, and they followed Delfina's maid along the corridor, they passed a window at which the girl halted.

"Is your Don Mac Leighton married?" she demanded. "There is a woman on a horse and he is putting a baby in her arms. How funny he looks! A man is so awkward with a baby. But—is he married?"

"No," said Galbraith, hoping her tones would not reach through the open window to the entrance below, hoping that they might not look up and see the laughing girl there watching them.

But they did. Both heard her voice, but only Anita lifted her eyes, and at sight of their Señorita, very pale still from the accident, but smiling at them, she uttered a little imploring cry and held up the baby. Leighton caught her arm, said a few hurried commanding words in Spanish, and turned the head of her horse so that it moved out of the range of the Señorita's vision.

Then only did he glance up, lifting his hat. A moment later the girl leaned forward eagerly as El Diablo came in view and she saw the man she had expected to hate ride away on the horse she loved.

"That woman was crying," she said, turning to Galbraith. "Did you not see her? Who is she?"

"The child's nurse," said her guide and guard, as they turned from the window to the room where Delfina and the maid waited for her. "Don Mac is his guardian; they live at his house!"

"That's funny, too," commented the girl. "He is not old, yet he seems to take care of everybody. But why did she lift up the child to us like that?"

"It was to me," said Galbraith, "and it was to say 'good-bye'."

XV

GALBRAITH'S WATCH.

Until the shadows began to grow long across the land, Anchor Darrett slept like a tired child in the pretty room where the maid had drawn the curtains and half closed the shutters so that the interior became one of soft tinted twilight. She had fallen asleep wondering who Galbraith was. He looked like a gentleman, was dressed like one, and had really spoken to her more than the others; yet no one had accounted for him. He was another friend of Felipe's, of course.

She wondered when Felipe would be home; she had forgotten to ask. Then she counted drowsily the carnations on the wall paper between the two windows and was falling gently into sleep when the sharp memory of a man's voice came to her, and the firm, warm clasp of a hand.

"If she recovers I shall just as certainly ask her to be my wife!"

She opened her eyes with a start. Was there some one in the room? Who had spoken?

"It was a dream, it must have been a dream," she answered herself. And then after a space of drowsy thought,—"But it was his voice—and—he did hold my hand, and called me 'dear'."

Then the voice and the pink tinted walls drifted far away. Ana came twice, slipping into the room and out again, nodding her head reassuringly to Galbraith, who was seated at the end of the corridor with a magazine whose leaves were seldom turned. Ana, who also informed him that the señora was asleep,—a few drops from the vial left by the doctor had effected that!—tried in various ways known to coquettish maids to arouse some show of interest in the Señor Braith, but he sat there hour after hour, with a closed book on his knee, and stared out stolidly over the most beautiful valley in the country. She had thought Don Mac and Señor Braith the two finest looking men who had ever been seen side by side, as they rode across the lawn and stood for a moment at the entrance after dismounting. She had wondered how Doña Delfina could ever have given up Don Mac, but now she thought she knew. The Americans made poor lovers, and the one in the corridor who said nothing and frowned much would never win a girl for himself as long as grass grew and water ran.

Once Luigo appeared in the corridor of the sleeping rooms, and Galbraith regarded him sharply, and seemed once inclined to speak to him, but the old man passed silently on with only one swift, stealthy glance at the American. Galbraith felt rather than saw the venom of the Castro faction in that glance, and he stood up and stretched his arms and stepped through the window onto the little stone balcony, where the ivy was sending out little creepers until the scrolls and griffin heads carved thereon were almost covered by the spreading green. From where he stood the door of Anchor Darrett's room was in as plain view as from inside the window. No one could approach it without being seen by him, neither,—and this was the point considered most important by Delfina,—neither could the girl in any return of her forgetfulness leave her room without arousing the temporary guard.

But Delfina had forgotten the balconies, and Galbraith, though in full view of the door, was a trifle removed, and less likely to hear words spoken on the other side of it.

And thus it was that he heard no sound of the "Señorita! Señorita mia!" murmured at Anchor Darrett's window.

But Anchor heard it as it wakened her gently, gently out of her long, refreshing sleep. At first she thought drowsily that it was the fragment of a dream sounding in her ears like that other dream that had brought her the hand clasp and the strange words with it. So she lay with closed eyes thinking of the days she could not remember, the days she had been ill in his house. They had told her so little, Delfina and the others! Nothing of the flood or how they found her, nothing of the baby. Strange how she had forgotten that baby! Yes, and the old woman! And all at once she remembered that the man who had lifted them both to her must have been Galbraith, yes, certainly, for the light from the adobe had shone plainly on his face!

"Señorita! Doña Anchor!"

Then she opened her eyes quickly and realized that the voice was not part of a dream.

Luigo stood just inside the half closed shutters. She was not surprised to see him there. In the old days Luigo, though some sort of a relation of Felipe's, had often helped old Dolores, their only servant. She even remembered what a good cook he was, and wondered vaguely if he had brought her something to eat or drink. She felt thirsty.

"You can come in, Luigo. What is it?"

"S—sh!" And the dark hand was lifted, warning her to silence. Then he came close, watching the door warily. "He is outside—Señor Braith! They put him there so no one could say one word with you! Si you listen, I tell you."

Anchor shrank a little against the pillow, the old face was so strangely, desperately eager.

"I—don't know what you mean," she faltered. "Why must no one speak to me?"

"For same reason they all telling you lies in the sala, all of them! Mother of God! Doña Anchor, listen close with the ears, but no say no word, no scream with the mouth! You are devoted to Felipe, maybe you help me! Felipe no would scream, and the old Señor Darrett he not knowing how to be afraid!"

The girl pushed back the hair from her forehead and raised herself on the pillows.

"You are afraid to tell me something, something I ought to know, for fear I shall scream."

"Señor Braith lying to you about Felipe. They all act the lie,—doctor, Doña Delfina, Don Mac,—all of them!"

"About Felipe! What about Felipe?" And she caught him almost roughly by the shoulder as the swift memory came to her of those men in the coach and the almost contemptuous criticism they had flung at his name. "Speak! Don't stand staring at me! Where is he? What has he done?"

"Done! Mother of God! He has done nothing, he has died! That is all, Señorita!"

"Luigo!"

It was not a scream, but a hoarse, smothered protest, and the old man caught her as she swayed forward.

"Doña—Doña mia!" he muttered, as he placed her back among the pillows and sank on his knees by the bed. "Listen! You must be strong quick! You must keep it all here." And he tapped his breast as she opened her eyes and stared at him in a blind sort of horror.

"You never say one word that I have told you, but you listen, listen all the time to the Americanos. They talk maybe si they think you no knowing. Then we put all the talk with the other things, and make a trap for the right man."

"The right man?—Luigo!"

She drew away from him in a sort of dread of his intensity and his rambling, disconnected sentences. A doubt of his sanity crossed her mind, for he looked half mad as he knelt there gesticulating with those long, brown fingers, his eyes wildly alert, as he half whispered his eager words to her, for the maid at the door or a step in the hall.

"Doña Delfina, she forgetting the double balcony and the room on the corner where the stair is," he leered triumphantly. "They no si afraid some one come in, as they are you maybe go out."

As she stared at him, she grew convinced that if Felipe was dead—and a wave of sickness came over her at the thought—then, without doubt, Luigo's mind had been unbalanced by the shock. As a boy Felipe had been his idol, and he was old now, old enough to be childish in his fancies. He had stolen to her because the doctor had said she must not be told. Her first impression of that black dress of Delfina's! Yes, he was perhaps telling her the truth of Felipe. That was the cause of the peculiar constraint she had felt but could not explain.

She could not explain it very clearly even yet, for she felt strangely numb after the electrical shock of his words. Tears of self pity had not come to her yet, but she was conscious of pity for the old man.

"It was right to tell me. I am not so sick as they think," she said gently. "But I am very tired, Luigo. Go, please! I must not talk of him or I—I might break down, and they would know you told me. I want to lie here still and quiet and think—think!"

"In one—two weeks the Señor Atterly come back," he persisted eagerly. "He fine friend to Felipe; he hate these Americanos who know so much; who boss over the world! Ay! How he is glad when I telling him I found the man the judges no find at all! And when you are beside me, when you say, 'Go on make the rope strong, hang the Americano——'"

"Luigo—hush!" she said, clasping her head in her hands distractedly. "You make me ill. You always hated Americans. But I am American, and why should I want ropes and hangings?"

"Why?" And the dark face was thrust close to her own, and she shrank from utter terror at the hate in his eyes. "You no American, you no want to be revenge? You no American, you go telling them I found the man, so he go run quickly away? Good!" And he got to his feet and folded his arms as he glared down at her. "Good! I no telling you his name at all! Felipe have a sister so devote——" and he flung back his head mockingly—"she eat the loaf and drink the wine long side the murderer!"

"Murderer?—Luigo!"

"The murderer of Felipe!"

He fairly hissed the words at her and flung out his hands in a comprehensive, accusing way appalling to the girl, whose nerves were already taxed to their utmost, and her moan was almost a scream as she sank back shuddering and weeping.

With a quick answering cry Galbraith was at the door rapping and calling to her, and a moment later Ana came running along the corridor. But when they entered there was no sign of Luigo. The shutters were closed a trifle more tightly than before, and the sound of the girl's weeping drowned the sound of a window closing from off the double balcony.

Ana paused within the door, poised for flight at the first warning of danger, and encouraged to venture thus far only by the presence of Galbraith, stalwart and authoritative, on the threshold.

"Is the Señorita—the Señorita is ill?" she faltered, as the Señorita shook her head and sat up, white and trembling.

"No, I am not ill. I want some one—your mistress—or the doctor—or any one!"

"Will I do, Miss Darrett?" Galbraith asked, moving inside the door. She stared at him a moment, striving to calm the tempest of feeling, striving to find words for the horror Luigo had left with her.

"Yes, you will do," she said at last. "You will do if you will tell me the truth, if you will tell me whether it is a crazy dream, or——"

She broke down again, trembling and covering her face.

"Let me know what it is," he said gently. "You have had a bad dream, perhaps—and——"

"Perhaps," she said, suddenly, letting her hands fall from her face and staring at him with almost accusing intensity. "I only want you to tell me two things: Is Felipe—my brother—dead?"

Ana shrank back with a gasp of astonishment, and looked inquiringly at Galbraith; but he had eyes only for Anchor Darrett, and his face paled under its tan as he said,

"Yes—he—is dead."

She drew a deep breath and stared at him in silence for a moment, stared as if to force from him any fact he might wish to hide from her.

"Was he murdered?"

Galbraith's eyes widened, and his regard changed to that of quick suspicion. It was the first time he had heard expressed in words the belief he knew was cherished by Darrett's many Mexican cousins. His glance took in the girl, the room; every corner where one of them might be hidden, but when his answer did come it was decided, emphatic.

"No, he was not! Don't let such an idea——"

But she interrupted him with a gesture.

"No more—just now! It is best for me to know the truth, but—I want to be alone now—please!"

"I shall be in the corridor if you should need any one."

"I shan't," she said wearily, "and you need not stay on guard there. I know all they were trying to keep from me—and I am not—too ill—to bear it. But I am tired—tired! I came back to my own land for happiness, and it gives me—this!"

XVI

ANCHOR RETURNS TO THE WORLD.

In spite of Delfina's appeals, she had insisted upon hearing the details, even upon seeing the papers with the record of Felipe's death. She did not tell how she had learned of the death, and the suggestion from Ana, that it was through a dream, struck a superstitious thrill to the hearts of the Mexican servants. They half believed, like the people of the cañon, that powers more than mortal belonged to the new Señorita. Even Delfina did not feel comfortable over it, but she did not question, and she did not oppose the reading of the papers.

"Words are of no use," insisted Anchor. "If I don't learn all there is to know, I shall fret myself into a fever imagining what it may be. If his death was an accident, and there was nothing horribly revolting about it, why should you try to keep it from me?"

Delfina, after a consultation with Galbraith, had to give in, and the girl, all alone, went over and over the brief record.

Thus, then, he had died while she was hastening to meet him. He had gone down into that valley of the shadow as she had ridden with high heart across the ranges. When she made the ride on El Diablo to save the name of Darrett in the Hermosa, she had been the only living one who bore it!

She fought out the battle of feeling all alone, and then sent for Delfina.

"You poor dear!" began the latter, at the sight of the girl's white face, but Anchor stopped her.

"Don't do that!" she said, avoiding Delfina's eyes. "I am still weak for some reason. If you commence to pity me, I may break down entirely, and," she said decidedly, "I don't mean to if I can help it. I am not sick, but I am likely to be if I stay here. Where are my clothes?"

"But the doctor said——"

"I shall go frantic if I have to lie here in bed! Your doctor is a nice man, and he knows a lot, but he does not know me."

And again Delfina had to give way, and helped Ana dress her in one of her own gowns of clinging black, deftly lengthened by addition of lacy flouncings, and deftly belted by a Spanish scarf to cover deficiencies of fit. The girl shrank instinctively from the sombre draperies, then moved herself to accept them.

"My own trunks,—are they nowhere in reach?" she asked. And then she heard of the wrecked coach, of her lost boots and the satchel that contained her trunk checks!

"Of course Don Mac can get your baggage anyway," said Delfina, reassuringly. "He is waiting now in the court for the doctor's visit, and he will blame me for letting you get up!"

"Does Don Mac Leighton, then, decide when people shall go to bed or get up in this Hermosa Valley?" inquired Anchor, as she gathered up the papers concerning Felipe's death.

As the swish of Delfina's train was heard on the stair, the two men looked up, and at sight of the girlish black robed figure beside her, both arose in astonishment. But while Galbraith took a step forward in protest, Leighton moved back.

"She would come down!" explained Delfina. "My authority was no sort of use."

"Neither would theirs have been," said Anchor, and holding her hand out to Galbraith, "You were good to me," she said simply.

He hesitated and glanced at Leighton, then took her hand.

"A cloudy sort of kindness," he observed. "We would all do a lot more if we could."

"Because I am Felipe's sister?" she asked wistfully, so much she wished to hear some one welcome her for Felipe's sake, some one to disprove that first impression she had received of Felipe's standing in Hermosa. Again Galbraith glanced at Leighton, but the latter only bowed assent as he placed a chair for Delfina.

" Not entirely," replied Galbraith at last. " You see, when we first began to want to do things for you, we didn't know whose sister you were. You were only," he added, " the Señorita of the Indian shoes,—' Miss Moccasins.' "

" Miss——? "

" Moccasins," he stated. " You know there was some time before we found any other name for you, and then we found the wrong one! But ' Miss Moccasins ' was what the Mexicans called you, and it seemed a good enough name."

" It is," she assented. " I don't care what they call me, so long as they all got out of that awful cañon. I know you. You followed to help me that night. Tell me all that happened after I—forgot."

So Galbraith told her all he thought best, told her how Leighton had dragged himself across the fields until he had found her, told her of old Perenza, and promised to drive her soon to see the people and the places. And all the time Leighton spoke of business affairs with Delfina, though she strove in vain to discuss the personal affairs of that day, and the change the revelation had made for them all.

" I may not see you for several days," he insisted, "and I have to take this opportunity to mention the details you should know."

"You are going away?" she asked, in some dismay, as she glanced at Anchor. She plainly expressed her dislike of his absence for so long a time. "You are going now?"

"Yes, to-night," he replied. "Galbraith will be in call if you need either of us, and he is worth two of me. I have business near Santa Barbara."

There was a lull in the conversation just then, and his words came clearly to Anchor.

"Santa Barbara!" she repeated, with a little sob in her voice. "Oh, I wonder how long it will be until I can make that trip. I am not ill, you know, only my head was hurt, and I suppose I won't dare make railway journeys until the doctor says so, but oh, I want to go!"

"To Santa Barbara?" asked Delfina.

"Near there, to our little old home, 'Treasure Trove,' you know."

She sighed, leaning back and gazing with half closed eyes at the picture she fancied there. "Not big or grand like this, you know, but a real adobe in a forest of flowers! I think I have lived on the memory of it all the time I was imprisoned in the snow and ice back East. I know I have a mental record of all the great trees of roses. I used to write of them to him, to Felipe!" And again there was the miserable effort to keep back a sob. "He kept them all pruned and cared for, and the old house ready and waiting for me! This is all very fine, Delfina, grand in many ways; but I'll never feel that I'm quite back in my old land until I hear the birds singing around in the old adobe again! But even there, even there, I shan't find him!"

She dropped her face in her hands and her shoulders shook with silent weeping. Delfina got up abruptly and walked to the far end of the sala. The two men looked at each other across the girl's bowed head.

Delfina knew, and they knew, what those promises of Felipe had amounted to! Delfina at that moment felt towards the weeping girl just as she had felt towards the people who were unlucky enough to have been caught in the flood. Leighton also arose and walked to and fro under the palms in the court. Only Galbraith remained beside her, and mechanically picked up the papers she had let slip from her lap.

"I—should not break down like this," she said at last, lifting her head and speaking more to him than the others. "But it is all so overwhelming, and much of it so strange."

He nodded without speaking and she leaned back closing her eyes, while he smoothed and folded the papers she had let fall. Leighton, halting by the archery, saw the headlines of one of them,—big, black and red letters announcing the shooting. He stared at Galbraith in amazement, and with two steps was beside him, gripping his arm.

"What in——" he began, half fiercely, but checked his words as Anchor opened her eyes and looked at him and then down at the papers.

"Yes," Galbraith confessed. "You need not try to annihilate us with looks, Mac! I knew you would object, and so would Dr. Elroy, but neither of you were here, and she thought she knew best."

"I did," said Anchor, nodding her head. "Don't you see I am less feverish? I could not wait, I had to learn for myself whether——"

She paused abruptly and looked at the two men. Were not these the Americans whom Luigo had doubted? This one beside her who had been so considerate, ever at her call, and that other, who scarcely spoke, but who had cared for her when she was helpless, who, though wounded, had dragged himself in the track of the flood until he had found her! She did not want it to be so, yet she knew that his was the voice, the sole memory she brought back with her out of those weeks of unconsciousness. She rebelled at the fact, and she hesitated about confiding to him the real reason why she had insisted on reading at once all records of the death in the adobe.

But it was he who questioned her when she hesitated.

" Yes, you wanted to learn for yourself whether——"

" Whether the death was an accident, or whether I must get well quickly to help hunt down the murderer."

" Anchor! " exclaimed Delfina in protest. " Do you suppose for a minute that if such work was to be done I should have neglected it? "

" No," said the girl slowly; " but we might see things in a different light, and I wanted to look for myself."

" And the reading has cleared the doubt from your mind? " persisted Leighton, while Galbraith, with the papers in his hand, sat silently staring at the cascade of water falling over the aquatic plants in the center of the court.

" I think it has," said Anchor, thoughtfully. " Whatever he meant to do with those revolvers—and he had enemies!—he probably had good reason for arming himself. But whatever his purpose was, it certainly was not to use the revolvers on himself, and there is not a trace of evidence to show that there was any one with him. No, I don't think the coroner made any mistake; Felipe was certainly loading the revolver when the cartridge exploded. There seems nothing else to think. If there were——"

"You would think it," said Delfina suddenly. "You look as if you want to think it."

"No, I don't, Delfina. But if it is true, if it should be true, I want to know it!"

"And then?" queried Galbraith, speaking for the first time. Delfina noted the curious hesitating way he spoke, and, looking at him, noticed the same tense, yet questioning, expression on his face. But he did not observe her scrutiny. His eyes were turned on Leighton, and Leighton was waiting for Anchor's answer.

"And then," she repeated, turning on Galbraith, "then they would find that in shooting Felipe they had not cleared the Hermosa Valley of Darrett blood! There would be enough left to fight his battles!"

"Oh, don't, Anchor," said Delfina, appealingly. "You are not strong enough even to think of it yet. It's too terrible to talk about. Luigo has become almost a maniac over the same idea. Wait until you are quite well before you think of it too much."

"Is it true that Luigo's mind is affected?" asked Anchor, quickly.

"Oh, I scarcely know. On all other points he is as rational as he ever was, but on this one—well, I advise you to avoid him. He will only make you miserable with his suspicions and fancies."

"He imagines things?"

"I should say so! I had some friends come to stay with me, but they couldn't endure him. The women almost had hysterics when they found him listening around their windows. And the men—well, he simply trailed the men like an Indian, especially the Americans! And they all found some sudden reason for taking their wives and sisters and going home. He is just as likely to trail either of you, or both of you," she said, looking from one to the other of the two men.

"It is well to be warned," said Leighton, looking at his watch.

"I must leave, if I am to catch my train, señora. I am pleased to find Miss Darrett so remarkably well, considering. Is there anything I may do for you?" he asked, interrupting himself.

"Nothing,—unless you stay home and postpone that trip?" and she smiled at him, appealingly.

"Can't possibly," he said briefly. "And for you?" he said, turning to Anchor.

"Nothing," she said with a little sigh. "You are going near the spot I love, but since I can't go, too——" and she shook her head sadly.

"Now, if you were really a Spanish cabellero," remarked Delfina, with a cynical little smile, recalling Leighton's avowal by the couch that morning, "if you were, you could find that spot and the roses in it, and bring back a bunch of them with a pretty speech. But the men nowadays seldom see the flowers they send with their cards; the florist substitutes what he pleases."

"No substitute could equal my Marechal Niel, growing by the door of our old adobe," declared the girl. "You have beauties here; I can see them in every direction. But my mother planted that one!"

"I trust you will be able to visit it soon," said Leighton, civilly, "and that you will find it all that you dream of."

"Ah, I am so sure of that last," she breathed fondly. "Felipe knew what a joy the place was to me. Did he ever take you to visit it, Delfina?"

"No, he never did," replied the Gonzales heiress, with a little shrug unseen by Anchor. Felipe had known his bride too well to fancy she would care to visit a little old house all very well for the laboring people, but——

Then Leighton went away and later Galbraith went back to the Mission. But in the days to follow, he grew not to mind the Mexicans who flitted, like swarthy ghosts, on his track. Even when he met Luigo in the Hacienda house or grounds, which he did almost daily, he got into the way of calling some reckless, cheery Spanish salutation, for which he was repaid in scowls.

The world of Hermosa had grown a little better place to stay since a pretty girl commanded attention. He uttered no word now of taking a run across the border for mental or physical recuperation. He worked like a Trojan through the day, doing Leighton's work, as well as his own, and keeping in the saddle from dawn till sundown. But after that his horse was headed for the Hacienda, and the hour there was recompense for the labors of the day. Delfina grew glad of his coming, while Anchor had not exactly the prim, temperate traits of the aged maiden ladies by whom she had been adopted. Yet Delfina found herself on guard over her own speech when in the girl's presence, and Delfina had never been accustomed to guards of that sort. The girls whom she knew would never have ridden that fiend of a horse across the ranges, but neither would they lift their brows at the sort of popular slang her brother's widow considered chic.

"Yet, I can imagine her in a fury of passion," thought Delfina, watching the girl sometimes. "I could even imagine her smashing things. But she looks contemptuous if a woman uses slang before her, and shocked if I lift a skirt above the knee! Ugh! Such women are simply not feminine. Feminine women come down off their stilts when there are no men around! Who would expect Felipe's sister to be a mixture of a fury and a nun?"

She had seen no evidences herself, she had only heard the account given by Pedro of how the

Señorita had laughed when El Diablo had pranced and tried to break away in the stable yard. And now that her health no longer required the isolation Leighton and the doctor had insisted upon at the Mission, now that they could speak to her face to face, there were many wives and children of the Mexican workmen who came barefooted and bareheaded up the drive to the Hacienda, and waited at the entrance for a word from their Señorita of the Moccasins.

Even this was a wordless irritation to Delfina. To her no such homage had been paid, though all of them lived on her land. To Felipe, who would have brought good times and prosperity to them all, they had given nothing but grudging, jealous civility, and now a mere chance stroke of luck had brought them to this girl's feet!

"That's the way they knuckle down to Mac Leighton!" she remarked to Galbraith, as Anchor went out to meet some of the flood refugees in the court. "And what has Mac Leighton done for them any more than any other landowner in the country? Look at those old people almost touching the ground before her! What's the reason some people win all sorts of races without even trying?"

"You ought to know," replied Galbraith, who was growing almost diplomatic in the atmosphere of the Hacienda.

" I don't know," she said impatiently. " They would not kow-tow to you or me in that way, or tag around after us with rosaries or flowers! And it isn't as Felipe's sister they ask to see her, mind you! No, they scarcely realize that her name is Darrett at all, and they never call her that! It is ' Our Señorita ' they ask for, their Señorita, mind you! And one stuttering idiot came this morning with a little lead saint for her, and asked for the ' Señorita Miss Moccasins '! "

Galbraith smiled grimly. He could see the irritation she felt at being ignored in her own grounds by those barefooted laborers. Gonzales, her father, had not been by any means a model man, yet he had held the liking of his workmen. His wife, the Dutch señora, could not have won their approval, though she had stripped her fat neck of its diamonds and showered them on the swarthy tribe. And the blonde Delfina, whose short figure was already, at twenty, almost matronly, was so truly their Dutch señora's daughter that they never forgot it.

She, on her part, hated them. She knew that if her people had been of the real Californians, or even of the old Mexican families, it would all have been different; then she could have lived the life of a princess in such a princely domain. As it was, her position was almost that of a pretender.

There are yet a few things left to be won instead of purchased.

She had always been annoyed by the attitude of the people towards herself, especially after her marriage with Felipe; but she had never felt the annoyance so acutely as since the advent of Anchor, nor could she content herself any longer with the contemptuous thought that they were too ignorant to show proper respect to a lady. A glance through the archway at Anchor and her visitors dispelled that fancy.

"I am sick of the place!" she confessed to Galbraith. "It never has been a home for one minute to anybody! And Mac Leighton is doing all he can to compel me to retain it."

"But he isn't shackling you down to live here," observed Galbraith. "You could rent it for five years, live abroad, and cut a dash of your own in some country you like better."

"Yes," she assented. "But I shan't leave until I see this fight out between Atterly and Leighton. Atterly is trying to get a decision from the court that I attained my majority on marriage. If he wins, he has an option on the place, for Felipe and I signed it. If the option holds good, it will mean a lot of spot cash instead of a little driveling percentage to spend each year."

"A little driveling percentage of fifty thousand!" commented Galbraith.

"Well, my mother would pay that for one necklace! What use is money if it's tied up? Mac Leighton is blind to his own success. If Hermosa were boomed as a winter resort—and it would win, too, so close to the mountains, with plenty of water and a branch road running up here—why, it would double the value of the Mission rancho in a year. Can't you make him see that?"

"Afraid not!" admitted Galbraith. "You see, Mac reasons it this way: In the first place, Mr. Atterly does not represent the railroad; he only hopes to if he can euchre you out of the estate. Hold on," he protested, as Delfina faced him indignantly. "I am not saying this to hamper you. Fight it out with Mac! But you see, it's about this way: You gave——" he hesitated over the name—"you gave your husband power of attorney?"

"Well. Of course I did."

"Exactly. And he used it."

"Of course he had to attend to the estate!" she replied, crossly.

"Do you happen to know how much he used on mortgages given to Mr. Atterly and his friends, or how much he got down on that option?"

"Mortgages?" she said, sharply; "I don't know what you mean!"

"I thought perhaps you didn't," he observed. "I don't know a great deal myself. But Mac Leighton has been doing a lot of sitting up at nights trying to sift things, and I guess he is on the home stretch. Those mortgages are due about the time the option expires and before your majority."

"Well?" she asked, after staring at him in puzzled silence.

"Well, Mac is hustling to raise the money to pay them off before that date—that's all."

"If he thinks I had no legal right to sign that power of attorney,—" she began. And then she stopped suddenly, as if struck by a sudden thought. "Why, say! None of us need to pay them, need we?"

"Mr. Atterly is counting on the property paying them."

"But if Mac Leighton is right about Mr. Atterly,—I don't acknowledge he is!—but if he is, and I had no legal right to sign those papers, Atterly can't collect it, no one can collect any debts made by Felipe, not a cent. And serve them right, too!"

Galbraith smiled—and agreed.

"Then what does Mac mean?" she demanded. "Is he trying to raise more money on the property, my property, to pay off debts he considers unjust? Why, what a fool!"

"Yes," agreed Leighton's friend. "But that's the sort of fool he is. However, if I were you, I would not worry about his raising money on the property. I don't know the details, of course, but I'm sure he will hand back your property to you intact. He's been a slave to that idea ever since he returned."

She got up and walked to the window, where she stood for a minute looking out. Then——

"What a fool!" she said again. But her tones had lost their sharp aggressiveness, and again Galbraith smiled.

After that conversation, Delfina grew particularly gracious to him. He had not only placed Leighton's attitude in a new light, but she acknowledged to Ana that he was a godsend as regarded the Señorita. If he had not been on hand daily, she would have had to invite some people down to help her over that first week, and the most of the girls she knew would be much too "larky" to introduce just now, when Anchor went over and over the mementos of Felipe, and strove to adjust herself to the idea of life without him, and comforted herself with the thought of his many perfections.

And that was the very hardest of all to endure, especially in the presence of another, and Delfina thanked her lucky stars because the other was Galbraith, who knew everything. Thus three days went by, and Galbraith was detailed to take the Señorita for her first drive. Delfina, with a significant grimace and remark concerning her last drive, excused herself to Galbraith from accompanying them.

The ponies were brought around by Luigo, who had kept sedulously in the background of late. He gave Anchor one long, keen look as she stepped into the carriage, and she gripped Galbraith's arm unconsciously.

"Are you—nervous about going?" he asked. But she shook her head with averted eyes until the old Mexican had crossed back of the vehicle and was out of her range of vision.

"It is Luigo. He makes me half afraid. Felipe's death has changed him so."

"Yes, it has," he agreed, and took his place beside her, as a mounted messenger loped his mustang along the drive and presented a box he carried to Delfina.

"Wait,—Anchor!—this is for you!" she said; and then her careless expression changed as she recognized the writing. "Of course it may not be of importance."

"Please open it for me," said the girl, leaning forward. "I am not expecting anything, but—oh, give them to me! My own, own roses! Oh, you beauties, you beauties!"

She laughed with tears in her eyes as she buried her face in the fragrant flowers, and Galbraith, watching her, envied the man who sent them.

"It is my first real breath of home!" she said. "And he sent them!"

Delfina looked at her sharply. The girl was so rejoiced with the message from her old garden that she scarcely noted her own words, or how they might be read. But Delfina had a memory of another unconscious confession in the carriage that day; who could tell but that the girl's mind, on that point, would remain unchanged?

"Yes," she said, smiling strangely. "I thought he would send them; you remember I suggested it?"

"You are both very kind," said Anchor, handing them back. "I will keep just this one. Will you have the others put in water for me?"

Then Galbraith spoke to the ponies and Anchor leaned back in the carriage and looked silently at the beautiful park and the fields and sloping stretches of orchard with the mountains looming back of them. Galbraith watched her to see if any point brought remembrance to her, but none did.

"They were going to be married once, I heard about it," she said, at last, abruptly. "Were they, was he in love with her? And now that Felipe is gone, will they——"

She did not finish the sentence, but Galbraith understood.

"No, they won't!" said Galbraith promptly. "It never was what you call a love affair. Gonzales and he were friends in a way, business friends; but Gonzales thought as much of him as if he had been his father. She was a pretty little girl then, and still at school. Gonzales was afraid,—afraid to leave her without a protector he could trust. That's how it was fixed up—Gonzales proposed it. He told me so himself! And he died happy because Mac agreed. That's about the record, I guess. She never cared very much for anybody except Delfina, till your brother came."

"It is good of you to tell me that," she said gratefully. "I knew he had enemies, business enemies I supposed. I heard the marriage discussed in the stage. It was because Felipe was a stranger among them that they resented him. And then your Don Mac was a favorite, and so——"

She halted uncertainly, and again he helped her out.

"That's it, exactly! Some of them did resent the slight to Leighton. But just understand this, and don't forget it, no matter what any one tells you: The marriage made no friction between Leighton and your brother,—never for a minute! Leighton was the first man to offer him a hand, the first one to stand by him and force the Hermosa Valley to follow. Don't you forget that, either!"

Her face lit up at his words: It was so good to know that Felipe won loyal friends! Then after a moment's thought she shook her head.

"Still, there is something I can't explain, if they were really friends, something I remember myself! I spoke of quarreling with him the first time we met! Well, it was not that exactly, but I did resent things he said about—Felipe."

"That night?" he said, looking at her intently.

"That night," she said, nodding her head. "The flood was coming. He warned me out of its way—and he—he said—it was Felipe's work! He said the Darrett name was a curse on the valley—and—and then he tried to stop me when I rode to save the people Felipe had helped to endanger."

"But he did not know who——"

"Oh, no; he did not know who I was. It was not a minute we stood there in the cañon. All we thought of was the flood, and he said it was Felipe's fault."

"Don't bear malice for that," he said gently. "Any one else will tell you the same."

"Oh, would you?"

"Yes, as a man who knows something about masonry, I should have to say yes. The trouble was your brother did not understand such work, and he was badly advised. The foundation of that dam had been condemned in Gonzales' time. It should never have been continued. Leighton came back from Mexico to stop it, and got here a day too late."

"But Felipe never intended, never dreamed ——"

"No, he never supposed it would happen, of course; yet you might go easy on Leighton for turning bitter when he knew there were dozens of lives to be ground out along that creek, and he helpless to save them."

"You are a good friend," she said, earnestly. "You tell me things plainly, and the rest try to cover them up because I've been sick."

"That's because they have sense, and I'm lacking, I reckon."

They had reached the Mission, and the ponies were held in to a walk. Anchor looked with interest at the weather-stained buildings, and exclaimed with delight at the garden of lilies.

"It is perfect! This is the real California I love! I am thankful for every glimpse of it!"

An old woman, swinging an infant to and fro in a hammock, looked up as if startled at the girl's voice. She let the hammock hang idly and came towards them, her hands upraised and her face alight.

"Mother of God!" she cried. "You have come back—our Señorita!"

"It is the old woman who nursed you when you were unconscious," Galbraith said softly. And Anchor thanked him with a look.

"It is nice of you to be glad to see me," she said, hesitatingly, a little confused by the exuberance of the welcome. "I must have been a great trouble to you all."

"A trouble! Ai yi! The trouble for us is when you going away! When Anita she telling me, I cry so I can have no tears left at all!"

She almost wept as she spoke, and then laughed at her weakness, and in her delight did not see the wonder, quickly veiled, in the girl's eyes.

"I am glad to come back," she said, soothingly. "I will come many times, if you will let me!"

"I telling that Anita how she lies; she say you never, never come back! I knowing always you come back. How you sleeping without José by the side?"

At this query, Anchor's self possession failed, and she turned a startled glance on Galbraith. He pointed to the child in the hammock."

"That is José," he remarked. "It is the child you saved from the flood."

"Oh!" she breathed, reproachfully. "And you never told me what a fine surprise you had prepared for me! And what a little beauty he is!"

She evaded Perenza's question by admiring José, and Perenza was too excited to notice it. To find that their Señorita—Don Mac's Señorita—had really come back once more changed all the world of the Mission garden!

"Ai! If he was but home again—Don Mac!" she muttered, as she watched Anchor,—Anchor, who was in the hammock with José, kissing and petting him for the sake of his great brown eyes—eyes like Felipe's!—and because his small hand closed so tightly over her proffered finger.

"Ai, if he was but home again. If he could but see her in the fine lacy dress and the charm of the new, decided manner! Surely, surely, if the man was not a fool, he would never let her out of his sight again!"

So she thought while she talked of other things, and called Anita to bring some wine or lemon drink for the Señorita such as she used to make for her. And on this hint, Anchor greeted Anita also with a pretense of remembrance, much to the latter's delight. But the only memory she recalled to Anchor was that of the woman seen from the window of the Hacienda, the woman who had wept and held up the child—and whom Señor Don Leighton had promptly sent away.

A glance at Galbraith confirmed the shadowy memory as a fact, and all at once she realized that those tears had meant much. The grief of them, and the joy of the old woman, linked her to the garden of the Old Mission more surely than any bonds yet forged linked her to the parks of the Hacienda. Who would weep with grief there if she should suddenly be called away? Or who would weep with joy at her return?

The first affection, the first caresses to greet her in California met her in the home of the man she had meant to dislike! She sighed impatiently as she realized it, and looked at the rose he had sent that morning, and wished all things had been different!

Then José, who had fallen asleep again, had to be carried to his own little cot, and Anchor had to view that, as well as the little room where she had struggled back to unconscious life.

"To think that I could forget such a perfect place!" she lamented. "My one recompense is that I am seeing it again. And this quaint dream of a place is his home? There is nothing to compare with it!"

"Nothing so old in this corner of the county," agreed Galbraith. "It needs repairs all around, but Mac hates to tackle it for looks."

"I should think so." And Anchor walked the length of the patio, and sat on the old stone rim of the fountain and watched the doves circling above the old tile roof. " In pictures of Mexico, I have seen just such interiors, but never anywhere else. Our old adobe I thought lovely, but it is a very modest affair, a mere cottage. But this—this suggests a rambling old one-storied castle, if a castle could be a ground-floor affair! This court is perfect, so is the garden, and the delight of my soul is the furnishing; there surely is not a chair or table that was ever made by an ' American '."

" I reckon you are right," agreed Galbraith. " And every piece was made to stay in its place, for they weigh like lead, and never a nail in them! "

" I have dreamed of such places," said Anchor, going in and out of the different rooms leading from the many arched corridor in which never the sound of a driven nail had been heard in the building. " And to think that for weeks I actually lived here, saw these perfect pictures at every turn, and forgot every one of them! "

Galbraith said little. He had wanted to see her once more by the fountain in the court, or under the thick green shrubbery of the old garden, and now that she was there, he was content to stand apart and watch her. Galbraith was having his own brief dream, knowing full well that it was a dream, and the awaking was as certain as day dawn.

At the Hacienda Hermosa she had not been so truly a part of the picture as under the rafters of the Mission corridors. Something of the discord of that first day in the house of Gonzales, its shocks, its revelations, had created an atmosphere never to be dispelled for the girl weighed down by the tragedy of Felipe's death and haunted against her will by the memory of Luigo's wild fancies.

And only in the home of the man she had meant to hate did she find real peace, real joy at her coming, and warm human hands outstretched to her, from the child in the hammock to old Perenza leaning on her cane!

And the sympathy affected her as the sunlight a belated rose. She was alive with glowing, eager interest. She heard over again the story of how Don Mac had brought her home in the gray dawn of that awful morning, of how he had scarcely eaten or slept for many days after, and how he was ever close to her door.

Perenza told it all most willingly. Much as she admired the returned Señorita in the fine clothes and with the fine manner, yet she missed the frank, childish note of the girl with the moccasins, the appealing, affectionate creature who had been Don Mac's shadow, and who frankly lamented when he was out of her sight.

This more dignified Señorita would not lament for such a cause, of course not! But she was even more beautiful than ever, and all Perenza's hopes came back with a rush as the eyes of the girl warmed and glowed at the recital of those days when Don Mac alone fed the courtful daily, doctoring the sick, clothing the children, finding work for the women and men, and burying the dead!

" And Don Mac so sick all that time! " added Leighton's historian, " so—oh, so white and so dragging the foot like this, even when every day in the saddle! Ai! mouths had been empty and maybe more graves full, si he had no come back in time. The good God sending him on account of that thousand times cursed Hermosa dam! "

Anchor got up suddenly and walked to the other end of the corridor. Was there no place where she could evade that one bitter subject? Curses—curses always for Felipe's work!

" Mary Mother! " muttered Perenza. " My tongue should be split before I spoil it all like that! A mule would have more sense! I all the time forgetting how he is her brother! "

She looked accusingly at Señor Braith; he might have told her! He pretended not to see. He realized all the girl felt, but he realized also that it might be just as well for her to learn that Leighton was not singular in his condemnation of Darrett's work.

After a moment Perenza got up and with a curious little smile hobbled after Anchor, and took hold of her sleeve.

"Come!" she said, persuasively. "A little while ago you laughing on account of them Indian shoes, how they giving you a name. Come! I showing you them shoes."

The girl's fingers closed understandingly over the old brown hand. She knew the old woman had forgotten the relationship when she spoke. She knew, also, that she must get used to hearing bitter words when Hermosa dam was mentioned. But it was so soon, so very soon, and it seemed but yesterday she heard of his death for the first time!

Perenza led her to the angle of the corridor. A Navajo blanket hung across an open door, and she pushed it aside with her cane, still holding the girl's hand, and led her within.

It had been like the other sleeping rooms, a cloister for some long forgotten monk. Anchor hesitated on the threshold, as she noticed sombreros, great Mexican spurs, and wonderfully made saddles, scattered about the little room, and hung about the wall. One picture hung where the light fell on it softly through the narrow window. The painting was of a woman, young, and darkly beautiful,—only a lace draped head and one white hand and wrist, but it caught Anchor's glance and held it.

"The Señora Mercedes, our own Don Mac's mother," said Perenza proudly. "She was the old governor's granddaughter. So very grand—that family! But all them girls, they marry with Americanos. So Don Mac, he all Americano, now, I think."

"How lovely she was," said the girl softly. And something in the mother's eyes held her own as did the eyes of the son. Even his voice came back to her as she looked,—his voice, and the compelling hand clasp, and the words,—the haunting, ever recurring words by which she had seemed drawn back to life and memory.

"Dios! Yes, she is the most lovely of all!" agreed Perenza. "She all the time La Favorita in those days. Señor Don Mac Leighton no is like new Americanos, who make the jump into dollars like yesterday. He all the time with all his grandfathers—a fine cabellero—how you call the gentleman."

"I did not know. I thought he was all that you call American—like me!"

"No, he is Californian. I live on his great-grandfather's rancho when I was a baby!"

"Here?"

"Sure! But they losing all their rancho, just like the common peoples, losing them all many times before ever seeing this place. He going to Mexico when little yet. After while he grow big, he making the money, a houseful! When he is tired of the mines he come back here with that Señor Gonzales. By and by he wants a rancho to live like his grandfathers lived before the American ever coming at all. Oh, he pretty smart! He making money all the time, where the grandfathers losing it!" And Perenza's old eyes watched the girl warily to see what effect the recital of his wealth and his cleverness would make on this American Señorita, who must not think that the Gonzales had all the money in the valley!

But the girl scarcely heeded that. She was thinking, as she looked at the picture of his mother, how fine was the life of those many grandfathers in the days before the race for money began in California.

"And he bought all this just to keep one corner primitive and old fashioned," she said at last. "That is fine! I should love to do that in my own little adobe, but it is hopelessly modern compared to this."

"She go die long before Don Mac make the money for her," said the old woman, nodding her head towards the picture. "So he carry that here with his own hands, and no other woman ever have her face on his wall. Look all around, Señorita, you see!"

Anchor smiled and nodded; no other picture was in sight, at all events.

"No, she is like a saint to him—his mother," went on Perenza, still regarding the girl strangely. "Her picture is beside the shrine, you see! No other ever meaning enough to him for her face to go there. But now—now, Señorita, si you look close——"

She had caught Anchor's hand again, and was gently drawing her closer to the shadowy wall beside the picture. The little niche built in all the rooms as a shrine was unusually shadowed in this one by the heavy frame of the painting beside it. But as the girl approached more closely, close enough to see what the little stone shelf held there in the shadow, she halted with a gasp of amazement and turned a startled, half accusing look on the old woman.

"Mother of God! No!" said Perenza, hastily reading the glance aright. "My hands never touched them Indian shoes at all! It is the day he coming home from that Gonzales Hacienda and leaving you there. Anita is crying, and so am I. Ai Dios, that was a day! And Don Mac—he not saying anything. He just picking them up, and I thinking he taking them to you. Dios! How I get an ague quick when I seeing them here! I say a dozen 'Ave Marias' and some 'Our Fathers'! He putting the shoes of your feet where he never put the picture like another señorita's face!"

"Perenza!"

Anchor's face flamed scarlet. She turned as if to avoid seeing what he had not meant her to see, but Perenza grasped her skirt.

"Listen, Señorita!" she said, pleadingly. "I praying you come for a long time. When I see him watch by your door, I know all the other señoritas he ever spoke to is forgot. I know it is for you he have wait. And listen, listen, Señorita! When you wake up on that bed you wake up same like a little child in your mind. You walk only beside him. You hold his hand every minute. All at once he can no forget you—his Señorita of the Moccasins! Don Mac thinking you a poor child with no home all these days when he loving you and his house covering you, and now, Señorita, now, Mother of God! now you are a fine lady, are you too proud to throw him a look of the eye? You no care at all that he going with white face like a dead man, and that he no sleeping any more except with your slipper against his cheek? You no care at all?"

Anchor strove vainly to unclasp the tenacious brown fingers. She felt helpless, trapped! She could feel her cheeks flame and, turn her head as she would, she knew those sharp old eyes had seen the tears in her own.

"Ai, zi! Señorita! You are not, then, too proud? Ai — Sancta Maria — the tear! Ah, Señorita, the cheek telling, the eyes telling, the tears——"

With a final wrench, Anchor tore herself loose and stood staring at Perenza angrily. The tears still sparkled in her eyes, but she dashed them away.

"But the tongue is not telling!" she declared, lifting her head defiantly. "You have no right to bring me here, to tell me this! And Don Mac, Don Mac never looks at me, never thinks as you say! And I, I tell you I would cut the tongue from my head before it should confess—confess——"

"The truth, Señorita mia?"

The girl looked at her.

"You are a very stubborn, very troublesome woman, Perenza!"

Perenza uttered a contented little chirrup of a laugh.

"Ah, when he speaks, Señorita mia, then you will confess!"

"He will never speak, Perenza," said the girl softly, as she passed from the dusk of the little room onto the sunflecked and vine wreathed corridor.

But softly as the words were spoken, they reached the ears of the man who stood in the old olive orchard just outside the window. His face was white as he leaned close to the wall that old Perenza might not discover him.

But old Perenza was on her knees beside his bed, mumbling prayers of gratitude, for the last fear had been driven from her mind of ever seeing Delfina Gonzales mistress of the Mission rancho! And when the prayer was ended and she clattered with her stick out into the patio, it was to find the Señorita of the Moccasins entering the carriage at the garden gate, and doing so with considerable haste.

A little ways along the hedge Diego fastened up a broken bridle, and demanded of the sleepy Mexican boys, why they had not taken charge of Don Mac's horse when he arrived, instead of letting it range as it pleased in the old orchard.

" Dios! Don Mac never coming home that we see," protested one of the boys. " Most like he just work somewhere, and letting the horse find home."

" Let us go," said Anchor to Galbraith. " Delfina will wonder at our long stay."

Perenza nodded her head and chuckled as they drove away.

" Ai—ay! It's a good day's work, Perenza! " So young and so pretty, and the man only a man after all! He never will see the Dutch

Señora's daughter again, when this girl looks at him. You no can drive so fast, Señorita, but how Don Mac can catch up, and you forgetting you leave that rose from your bosom on his pillow!"

XVII

THE SENORITA RESCUES GALBRAITH.

But despite Perenza's hopes, Don Mac made no attempt to ride after the carriage of the Señorita that day, or the next, or the next after that! In fact, Delfina finally sent for him and received a diplomatic note of thanks and the information that he must forego the pleasure of a chat at present: her friend, Mr. Atterly, was winning a few points in the Hermosa game, and he, Leighton, was losing sleep, nightly, planning countermoves.

"Nonsense!" said Delfina, petulantly, tossing the note from her. "The man must think I'm a fool to believe that! Can't he plan here as well as at the Mission?"

"The Mission and Mac don't see much of each other lately," remarked Galbraith. "He is not there one day out of five."

Delfina shrugged her shoulders, and looked her disbelief.

"What happened the day you stopped there with Anchor?" she demanded. "He came back from Santa Barbara that day."

"Nothing happened. We didn't see him."

"Well, it's curious! He has not come near since then, and Anchor will ride or drive in any earthly direction but towards his rancho."

"Oh, well, she may not fancy that particular road."

"Don't be an idiot! It's the prettiest road in the country."

While they talked, Anchor rode up the path slowly, so slowly, so thoughtfully that she scarcely heeded when she reached the portal, and the stopping of her horse aroused her with a start.

"I never saw you creep along like that before," declared Delfina. "Did you fall asleep?"

"No, I was thinking, and ever since the flood, the operation of thought in this cranium is slow and painful. Delfina, do you know where Luigo is?"

"No, indeed! He disdains all of us lately. Marta tells me he threatens to go to Mexico. Good luck send the day!"

"I was in the village," said Anchor abruptly, "and I saw him come out of a lawyer's office with a slender man, a gentleman who wears glasses."

"Atterly!" interrupted Delfina.

"Perhaps. But why should Mr. Atterly pat Luigo on the shoulder and tell him his fortune was made? And why—— Where is Señor Leighton?" she asked suddenly, interrupting herself.

"He was leaving the Mission as I was starting here."

"Was he? Is he coming here this evening?"

Delfina gave a little petulant laugh.

"I don't know, and, if you will forgive a short answer, I don't care! I sent for him and he returned me a very lame excuse."

"Do you want him?" asked Galbraith. But Anchor shook her head.

"They mentioned his name, that is all. They mean to annoy him in some way. The stranger said they could side-track Leighton now and give him something beside Hermosa to put his time in with. Then he laughed and patted Luigo's shoulder, and said his fortune was made. Now what could Luigo have done for them?"

Her question was addressed to Delfina. But Delfina did not know and did not care. If Mr. Atterly was in the village, common courtesy demanded that he should call on her before consulting with her servants! Of course—Luigo was not exactly a servant—still——

Anchor was drawing off her gloves at the foot of the stairs which she was about to ascend, when she noticed Galbraith's alert, uneasy expression.

"Do you know what Luigo could have told them?" she asked pointedly.

"No, I don't," he answered, picking up his hat.

"But I guess I'll be moving. If they are laying any trap for him, it is as well he is told."

"Thought he was not home!" said Delfina, with an air of pique.

"He is with the county surveyor along division line by the old Mission dam, at least he started there at sun up."

Delfina smiled skeptically.

"You never fail him—do you?" she remarked.

"I hope not."

"Not even when it's a case of stretching the truth?" she persisted.

"Not even if it's a case of a whopping big lie!" he said, smiling at her. "But this time it's the truth!"

"Of course," she agreed. "A sort of Damon and the other fellow! How long has it lasted?"

"Oh, we've been pards since he lifted me out of a pit of trouble ten, twelve years ago. And to make sure that I wouldn't tumble in again, he didn't let go his grip on me after he got me out."

"Now what sort of trouble could you need help in?" derisively queried Delfina, as she glanced at his six feet one of stalwart manhood.

"Oh, just trouble! A man may weigh a hundred and seventy and not have an ounce of sense, you know!"

Anchor at the foot of the stairs regarded them soberly. Delfina was laughing, but Galbraith, glancing at the girl, grew suddenly serious.

"What is it, Señorita?" he asked. "Have you any commands before I go?"

"No," she said, doubtfully, "no commands—but——"

"Well, what is it?" And Delfina's tones were slightly impatient. The seriousness of the girl was a sort of kill-joy to Felipe's widow. "Don't be afraid to speak."

"Afraid!" The girl's eyes flashed darkly for an instant. "I—it is not quite my place to speak, perhaps, but I could not help thinking that while you two laugh over some pit he saved you from, there are others digging pits for him, perhaps, and no one to warn him!"

Galbraith stared at her a moment and then a dull red flush crept over his face.

"I am everlastingly at your feet for that reminder. Adios!"

The next instant he was gone and a little later they heard the clatter of his horse's feet.

Delfina flung herself into a chair with an impatient sigh.

"Will nothing content you but to drive all the men away?" she demanded. "First Mac, now Braith! Of course Galbraith is not much of a cavalier, yet he is a man!"

"You think—you think Don Mac stays away because—because I am here?" asked Anchor, suddenly, sitting down on the lower step and regarding Delfina with questioning, compelling eyes. "You think that?"

"Ah-h?" And Delfina's eyes half closed as she leaned back and looked at the girl strangely, almost insolently, before speaking. Then she laughed, a little, short, mirthless laugh that made Anchor shrink instinctively.

"So that is how the cat jumps, is it?" asked her sister-in-law. "It isn't Galbraith at all, it is Mac!"

"I don't know—I don't know what you mean," said the girl, falteringly.

"Oh, yes, you do! Own up, now!" And Delfina's voice and laugh tried hard to give her words the color of careless good nature. "I guess you remember more of your stay at the Mission than you let on. You and Mac have been playing the rest of us for tenderfeet, eh? Now, tell the truth: Did you quarrel, or what did happen the day Braith took you over there? Mac got there before you left, and about an hour after he sent you those roses. That much I do know. But from that day to this he has never shown his face here! Now what happened that day?"

Anchor's thoughts flew back to the little shrine in his sleeping room and her moccasins in the shadow there. Delfina saw the blush creeping over the girl's cheeks, and felt a cold anger at the discovery that the girl was in some way accountable for Leighton's absence,—and Braith's, too! She felt an annoyance that even Galbraith had obeyed so quickly her lightest shade of a command. Delfina had been the only feminine ruler of the Hermosa for a long time, and she resented the fact that this girl could, for any cause, keep Mac Leighton away, and she resented, also, the tell-tale blush.

Anchor got up and went over to the window, for Delfina's laugh annoyed her more than the persistent questions.

"Nothing happened," she said, a trifle coldly. "We only talked with the old housekeeper and I rocked the baby asleep in the hammock. Your Señor Leighton was not there."

"He was there—somewhere!" declared Delfina, "watching you doing duty as child's nurse, perhaps, for the child, they say, he has agreed to father."

Her disdainful laugh gave an ugly color to the speech, and Anchor turned on her suddenly with startled, darkening eyes.

"He—has agreed?" she faltered; and the late blush had faded from her cheek.

Delfina did not care for Mac Leighton any more than of old, but she had of late been considering several very sensible plans regarding the Hermosa. Leighton had been in a way the foundation of them; the devotion he had shown to her since Felipe's death naturally could mean but one thing, and it was a victory worth while to win a man like Leighton a second time. The first time, of course, Gonzales had done the proposing and it had been an affair of business, but now——

And this girl with her big eyes, this girl who had won worship where she had bought tolerance, was she to be allowed to ride rough-shod over Delfina's plans as she had ridden like a tempest over her lands that first evening in the Hermosa Valley?

She leaned back smilingly and noted the hit made by her little arrow of malice.

"Oh, don't look so shocked, Anchor," she protested. "Your grand aunts did not teach you much about the real world, I guess. Mac is better than the most of men, but there are always Mexican girls around the ranchos, you know, and someone has to look after their children!"

"But this child—you must be mistaken!—this child is the one I saved, the one I carried out of the flood. That is why——"

Delfina interrupted her with a shrill little laugh.

"Oh, that is why Señor Leighton is to bring it up as his own, because you saved it?" And she laughed again, highly amused at the idea.

"That was a clever thing to tell you. For, of course, they had to make up some reasonable story when you visited a bachelor establishment, and asked questions about the babies they had not time to put out of sight! Oh, Anchor, don't look so shocked and solemn about it! You will get over your prudishness after a season or two out here."

"I shan't get used to liars," retorted the girl.

"Well, Mac didn't do that part of it," observed Delfina. "He only kept out of sight and let the others do the romancing for him. But, in future, it might be as well to be more careful where you pay visits: Galbraith meant no harm in taking you, but——"

"And that child, the child they said I claimed when I was ill, the child they said slept beside me, was his?"

Delfina nodded and yawned sleepily.

"Yes, I hear he is adopting it legally. Great luck for the little beggar, isn't it?"

Anchor made no reply. She felt faint and sick at heart. The perfume of those roses and the memory of the treasured moccasins, had filled her hours with vague dreams of beauty. Even the music of the child's laugh and its clasp of her fingers blended into the harmony of memory that was hers. It all belonged to one perfect day.

And the day was gone, gone without a hope left of a morrow!

"Are you sick, Anchor?" demanded Delfina, sharply. "Heavens! you are not going to faint, are you?"

"I think not," returned the girl, whose eyes had closed for a moment as she leaned against the window frame. "I am only tired."

"Well, for goodness sake go to bed and get rested. You frightened me silly for a minute. What's that?"

It was a shouting mass of people on the highway just outside the gates. Only their heads could be seen above the hedge, and they were following three men on horseback who were retreating before the mob in an awkward fashion, half backing the horses that they might face the shouting, gesticulating, threatening crowd.

Delfina hastily found a field glass, and looked anxiously at the unusual commotion.

"It's Sheriff Mahan!" she cried in alarm. "He's got a prisoner they are trying to take from him—there is another man helping him, a deputy, I suppose! I can't see clear for the hedge, but the sheriff is surely trying to reach our gate. Oh, how horrible!"

Anchor picked up the glass, but could see little more than Delfina had described. The backs of the men were towards her and she could not see their faces or their horses, for the hedge. She could see a revolver in the sheriff's hand. She could see that he was shouting and arguing with the mob, and she could see that the deputy kept very close to the third man and that their horses were backed slowly, slowly towards the gate.

"They can't open the gates without turning," she cried, throwing down the glass and reaching for her whip; "and they don't dare turn their back on that mob!"

"Anchor!—Come back!—Anchor! Are you crazy?" screamed Delfina, angrily.

But no reply came back. An instant later and Anchor dashed around the curve from the stables, without a saddle and bent low on a little mustang's back. She was speeding to the gates to reach them before the men.

The shouting and curses blended with the thud of the nag's flying hoofs, and it was all a confused riot through which she heard no distinct word, saw nothing ahead but the great iron gates, hung on massive stone pillars.

The three men faced the circle of the mob. As she slipped from her horse, she saw the reason why two of them kept so close together, and could not manage their horses to advantage,—the prisoner was handcuffed to the deputy.

Their horses were almost touching the gate. She waved her hand and screamed to them, but only a few of the Mexicans mounted on draught horses saw her; no one could hear her single voice in that roar.

A swarthy Mexican waved his hat and cheered at sight of her. Others leaped to the backs of their work horses, climbing up by the chains and the straps of the harness, standing erect and shouting at sight of her. " The Señorita! Our Señorita!" they cried.

The sheriff cast one glance over his shoulder and saw a slender girl lift her hand imperatively as she swung open the heavy iron gate.

" Quick!" he shouted to his deputy. " Inside! Quick!"

The presence of the girl had for an instant a bewildering effect on the leaders of the mob. They cheered her presence there without knowing her intention, and before they realized what it was, the three horses were inside and the gate was clanged shut and the girl locked it in the face of the baffled mob.

One man with a curse drew a revolver; but two others flung themselves on him and dragged him from the horse.

" No," they shouted with one accord, " not the Señorita! No harm to the Señorita!"

This incident turned for a moment the temper of the crowd without; they shouted questions to each other instead of curses at the sheriff.

Anchor, breathless and exhausted, leaned against the gate. She saw the servants running from the house and was conscious that one of the men had dismounted and was beside her.

"Are you hurt, Señorita?" he asked, quickly. But she smiled and shook her head.

"No—out of breath—that is all!" she said, pantingly. "Oh—I had to run so fast!"

"It was the pluckiest thing I ever saw a woman do!" he exclaimed, admiringly. "You saved me my man all right, and I can telephone from here for extras."

Then Anchor looked around at the two men who had ridden into the shade of the great arbor of the driveway. One was a squarely built, powerful-looking young fellow, whose wrist was manacled to that of the man beside him. And, with a sense of relief, Anchor saw that the third man was Galbraith.

"Oh, it is you!" she remarked. "Well, I am glad you are here. Are you the sheriff, or are you the deputy?"

He looked at her, a strange, steady look, then he opened his lips to speak. But no sound came, and he turned an imploring glance to the man beside her.

But the man beside her did not see it. His eyes were on the face of the very pretty girl who had saved his prisoner for him.

"No, Señorita, I am the sheriff, and you have helped me save Mr. Galbraith from the crazy Mexicans out there. He is under arrest for the murder of one of their tribe."

"Mahan!"

Galbraith's voice was half appealing, half commanding, and it made the sheriff realize who the girl must be. His face flushed in embarrassment.

"At least—they claim him—on the mother's side," he stammered. "I—I'm very sorry——"

"What does it mean?" she asked, turning to Galbraith. "You are under arrest—you!"

"Señorita! Señorita!" called one of the Mexicans whose wife and children she had saved from the flood of Hermosa, "open the gate and give him back to us! He has killed your brother, Señorita. Give him back and we will crucify him!"

Anchor leaned against the gate and stared with white face from one man to the other. Galbraith looked at her once, and in very dread of what the shock might mean to her, turned to the sheriff.

"Mahan, take her away," he said, in a low tone. "She has been ill, and the whole miserable business——"

"It is true, Señorita, it is true by the holy cross!" screamed the Mexican. "Si you lock the gate with your own hand, Mother of God! how can we touch him? But si you say the word, one word, Señorita! and we tear down a wall of stone to get at him!"

The sheriff turned to the girl with quick appeal.

"They could do it, Señorita,—Miss Darrett! They could tear out that hedge like grass! It is for you to say the word. It's a God-send. You can influence them!"

"Speak, Señorita! We all waiting the one word! He go killing your brother!"

The girl shrank again as though the cry had been a physical blow. She lifted her eyes and turned mutely from the face of the sheriff to that of Galbraith, where it rested in one long look of question.

He had uttered no word of denial, but she held up her hand to the Mexicans for silence.

"My brother would want justice, not murder! We will wait for the law to give justice!"

Some of the Mexicans screamed threats and accusations. But cooler heads had followed from the works, the better class of the natives and the Americans, and they drew their more fiery mates from the gates and shouted offers of help to the sheriff.

The girl faced them with mute lips and unseeing eyes, until the shouts dwindled into murmurs, many of them blessings on their Señorita.

Then she smiled on them faintly without seeing one face clearly in all the motley mob. But not until the last threatening face had retreated did she turn to the three men who watched her as they might watch a magician change the skies from clouds to sunshine.

The entire household had followed her and were clustered, awestruck and incredulous, about the prisoner. Delfina had just arrived and was appealing to the sheriff in shrill tones of inquiry, protest, and threatened hysterics. Some of her appeals were made to Anchor, who heeded her not at all and who turned to Galbraith.

"What is there you want done?" she asked, slowly, deliberately, as if weighing each word.

"Anchor!" screamed Delfina. "Don't you understand? They say he shot Felipe—Felipe!"

"Stop that, Delfina!" returned the girl, with scant ceremony. "I've just got rid of one mob by asking them to wait for justice. Are you going to be more senseless than they?"

"Senseless! Oh, Mr. Mahan, she is simply mad! Speak to her, won't you? Tell her——"

Anchor shook her head and held up her hand impatiently.

"Tell me, Mr. Mahan, what is to be done, what he needs to have done!"

Galbraith leaned forward in his saddle, the color flushing his face strangely.

"Good God," he murmured, incredulously, "is it me you are thinking of? me?"

She avoided his eyes, but nodded her head.

"You are his best friend," she said, simply. "If he had been here, he would have sent the people away, and as he was not——"

"Oh!" And a strange, patient smile of comprehension shone in Galbraith's blue eyes. "That is true, Señorita. His best friend! Well, I'll show you both I don't forget that. He must know of this and know it right. Will you take the word?"

Anchor turned to Roderiguez in the crowd.

"Give me a saddled horse," she said. And then, to Delfina's horror, she turned again to Galbraith.

"Tell me the word you want sent and where to find him," she said, briefly.

And he realized that the Señorita of the Mission garden was gone, and that the semi-invalid of the Hacienda de Hermosa was only a memory, and that the girl calling for the horse and turning with brusque impatience from Delfina's appeals was the Miss Moccasins who had swept ahead of the flood with authority as resistless as the command of the waters.

XVIII

ANCHOR AND MAC LEIGHTON.

The surveying party had halted under a wide-spreading oak where a rare spring crept to the surface and spread a silvery green pool in the shadows. To the south were great sloping stretches of grazing land, and across there Leighton was exploring alone for the half erased landmarks of an earlier generation.

"He does more work than any two of us," commented one of the men, exploring the lunch basket in hopes of an overlooked biscuit.

"Um!" agreed another, rolling a cigarette. "He never does let up, doesn't stop long enough to get a comfortable drink. Gee! Who is that?

"Now, I wouldn't have time for a drink, myself, if a girl like that was riding to head me off!"

Leighton had reached a little belt of stunted pine on the edge of a ridge, when the hoof beats struck his ear, and a moment later he had met Anchor in the green shadows, swaying in the saddle and almost falling into his outstretched arms.

She had not realized her own lack of strength until the miles slipped one by one behind her around the seemingly endless fencing. Then all at once she saw him, the one bulwark of strength for all of them.

She reached out her hands to him in mute appeal, and the temptation was strong enough to break down the man's reserve.

With a cry that was half a moan, he gathered her in his arms like a child, and hot kisses were pressed on cheeks, and lips and white throat, while broken, tender words of endearment brought a happy light into her heart as she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

The end of a blind struggle seemed over. Whatever of tragedy encompassed them, there was no longer the black barrier of misunderstanding to loom between.

"You did kiss me—before—didn't you?" she whispered. "I am sure of it now! You kissed my hand—you woke me—you said before them all that I should be—your——"

"Oh, my God!" breathed the man, with lips against her throat.

"Your—wife!" she said, shyly. "Oh—oh, why have you kept away from me ever since?"

The kisses ceased and the arms relaxed, but his face was still hidden on her shoulder. She lifted her hand and rested it caressingly on the dark waves of his hair.

"Was it on account—of José?" she whispered. "She told me to-day. I—I—thought I would hate you—but I don't! I would help you take care of him, he shall be my child, too!"

He lifted his head and stared at her and she saw there were tears in his eyes.

"Darling, darling!" he muttered, between shut teeth. Then he arose abruptly from where he had knelt with her in his arms. He almost lifted her to her feet from where she stood leaning against the panting horse. Then, with a sort of rough decision, he stepped back and looked at her strangely, steadily, sombrely.

"It has not been a child that kept me away from you, little girl," he said, at last. "It—has been——"

He paused so long that with a conscience-stricken cry she interrupted.

"Oh, Don Mac! Never mind what it has been!" she half sobbed. "That is over, over forever! I came to tell you the most awful thing, the most terrible you can think of! And—God forgive me!—I forgot it all when you kissed me! Oh, Phil, Phil!"

She was clinging to his arm again, blinded by her own remorseful tears. But he laid his hands on both her shoulders and turned her towards him.

"Tell me the worst you have to say, and tell it quick!" he said, sharply. "Suspense is the worst of hells!"

"It is Galbraith, your friend Braith!" she faltered. "He is arrested for the murder. It is Luigo and the Mexicans! They tried to take him from the sheriff. Oh, it was awful!—awful!"

"Galbraith!" He cast his eyes quickly towards the group of surveyors, who had resumed their work and were filing out along the line: "You won't mind riding back alone?" he asked. "I must send for a horse and take a short cut to town to clear Galbraith!"

"No—listen!" she begged, catching his hand again. "I brought you the word to keep you from going. He doesn't want you to go near him. Oh, don't look like that! It is true! Listen to me! Let me tell you!"

He stared doubtfully at her for a moment and then pointed to a truss of dried bunch-grass.

"Sit down," he said, quietly. "Tell me the word he sent."

He threw himself on the ground a little distance away and listened intently to every detail until the arrival of extra deputies.

"I would not leave until then. I would not trust Luigo and the Castros; they had been drinking and might come back. They want to kill Galbraith!"

"He denied the—the——"

"Not even that! He only said to tell you they had not an iota of real evidence, that it was all Luigo's madness and a scheme of the lawyers to draw your attention just now from Hermosa affairs. And it may be true; I think it is—in part. He begged you not to 'play into their hands' by going near him, to give every minute to the work you have undertaken. If he wants you, he will send for you, but begs you to keep away until he does."

"Still, you distrust him?"

"I did not say so, but I feel that he knows more than he confesses! And though he goes free, though he never really harmed Phil, yet, Mac, I never want to see him again!"

"Don't say that," said Leighton, putting out his hand pleadingly. "He—he almost worshiped you, Anchor. He would face death for you any minute, for you, or any friend. Are men like that so plentiful?"

"Delfina stormed, and accused, and finally appealed to him. But it was all no use," said the girl, wearily. "All he would say was that it was a big mistake, and to tell you there was no evidence. He did not seem to care what any one else thought. He says it is Mr. Atterly who helped Luigo, and that is true! He says they count on you to throw aside all other affairs to help him, and that you must not walk into the trap, for there is no real evidence. He laid stress on the fact that you have only so many days now in which to settle Delfina's affairs before her majority, that you have enemies and a tricky lot of men against you, that even the loss of one day may undo all you have worked for. He was so intense in his desire to keep you out of it that it must mean something very important."

"Yes," assented Leighton, "it does."

Then he arose and walked over to where her horse was nibbling the grass. He brought it back and she saw that the interview was over, the privacy of it, at least, for the surveyors were coming closer.

He helped her to mount, and then stood, his hand on the bridle, looking up at her.

"Well," she said at last, "will you do as he asks?"

"I will do as he asks until my own work is done; then I reserve the right to interfere in his affairs. My girl! If I could only hear you say you believed in him!"

"I can't!" she said, with a little shudder. "Phil was all I had in the world—all! No one out here seems to think of him as I did,"—and she looked at Leighton wistfully,—"but the man who shot him, or shielded his murderer, if he was murdered, is not a man I ever want to see again. I want him to have justice, but I could not show him mercy."

"Good-bye!" said Leighton, and turned the head of her horse towards the Hacienda.

"Mac!" she said, softly, and held out her hand unseen by the men.

"My girl! My Señorita!" he murmured, crushing her hand to his lips. "Good-bye, little girl, good-bye!"

XIX

THE VISIT TO TREASURE TROVE.

"It isn't one bit like Mac Leighton," protested Delfina, "when he knows I must be prostrated by this awful shock. It's enough to half kill us both! To think that Galbraith was not only tolerated, but made welcome here. Ugh! I don't see how he ever entered the room where Felipe's picture hung."

"I don't think he is guilty," replied Anchor, wearily, "but I think he knows who did do it."

"What about his coat with Felipe's note asking him to be there that very hour? What about the broken comb Luigo picked up in the adobe, and which, several can swear, belonged to that woman?"

Anchor breathed a little shivering sigh of repulsion, and Delfina, understanding, shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"You needn't take that part of it so hard, Anchor. You know I gave you warning that real men are not the spotless heroes of the story books!"

"Thanks to their wives, perhaps!"

Delfina laughed outright at the retort.

"Oh, you are an old maid! Do you suppose a goody-goody wife would have suited Felipe?"

"Do you mean to tell me my brother was a bad man?" asked the girl, angrily. "Must you add your bitter fling to all the others of the Hermosa?"

"Bitter! Nonsense! He wasn't a doll baby, that's all! But what—what—what—keeps Mac Leighton away when I need him most? Everybody must think it strange!"

"Lounging in your sala is not the way to undo your speculations!"

"Oh, you've that bee in your bonnet?" laughed Delfina. "Well, I wish his devotions to my interests were expressed differently. Mr. Atterly is proving the real friend these days! What could we have done in this Galbraith affair without him?"

"You might have encouraged Luigo's craziness in the beginning," suggested Anchor.

"Craziness! It seems he is the only one of us who had sense; he always hated Galbraith. Well, I'll be of age in another week, thank Heaven! Then I'll be free to settle a lot of scores myself! When you saw Mac, what excuse did he make for not coming near us any more?"

"He made none. It was not necessary. He was busy and he knew I knew it."

"You appear to understand each other wonderfully," observed Delfina, tartly. "It is a bit strange, if you can't remember your days at the

Mission, for then you scarcely know him; you have not seen him six times since!"

She looked keenly at the girl and this time Anchor had no retort.

All she knew of him was the murmured assurances of love that one day,—the close, thrilling clasp of his arms!—and back of that the memory of treasured moccasins on a shrine, and a dream-like life of which nothing survived but the echo of his voice, the light of his smile!

True, there had been no promises of any sort between them. He had put her on the horse and said good-bye, and she had ridden homeward in a trance of utter happiness, all the tragedies forgotten, sure only that he loved her, and living on that memory until she heard his voice again!

Many days had gone by and she had not heard it. Court was in session and he was winning all points in what he had called the "Hermosa game." He was rushing things through in a way to cause comment on every side. Sometimes Delfina admired it when Mr. Atterly brought her returns, and sometimes she railed against it, as when her notes to him secured only evasive replies. And through it all the girl believed in him and waited.

Then rumors came to them that the Old Mission was for sale: that was why the careful new survey was made. The natives were disconsolate. Esperenza Moro was sick in her bed because of it, and Don Mac worked night and day and cared no longer who was sick or who was dead. Not even Señor Braith had he gone near, and that was strangest of all!

When the sale of the Mission was spoken of, Anchor rode into town for the first time since she stopped the mob at the gate. The blood of the rioters had had time to cool and she was greeted with apologies and florid blessings as she rode past their homes or their work.

In the village she visited a retired judge whom she heard had known her father in the old, golden days of the coast lands. From her recovered trunks she had taken different legal papers for his inspection, and over them they talked for an hour.

" I shall, of course, act for you in the matter," said Judge Bisham, finally, " but your aunts should have tied up your money for a few years longer."

" You agree it is a fine property and offered at a sacrifice? "

" Oh, certainly. It is the real key to the water rights of that section, you know. In fact, Mac Leighton could realize much more from the property if he had not tied up the rights to the ranchmen as he has done. Mr. Atterly's friends would have given a much higher figure but for that. A beautiful place, too, and Mac Leighton had to sacrifice it—must be in some special money trouble!"

"And my name need not appear in it just yet?"

"Certainly not, though I rather think Mrs. Darrett would approve of such an investment. My only reason for advising caution was that I feared you were acting on impulse. And it is a big lot of money,—not much to you, of course, but too much to sink on a sudden fancy!"

"No, it's not a mere fancy, Judge!" she said, and rode back to the Hacienda to learn that she was one of the witnesses depended upon by Galbraith's attorney to establish his alibi.

Delfina protested indignantly. It would look as if Felipe's own relatives were trying to clear the murderer. But Anchor, after the first instinctive shudder at the idea, agreed that as she had seen Galbraith that evening, had spoken to him, there was no reason why she should not say so before a jury. But she felt suddenly, like Delfina, what a mountain of strength Leighton could be to them both those days if only—only——

All her nature protested against any criticism of his silence, even while all her heart cried aloud for the love showing through his tired eyes that day, and the clasp of his strong arms as he kissed her.

And out of her very longing, her absolute inability to endure longer, not only the suspense, but the strange sense of mystery pervading it, she announced one morning that she was able to visit "Treasure Trove." There in the garden he had found the roses for her; somewhere under its vines she might find peace.

Delfina's protests against such a visit were so feverishly insistent that Anchor wondered, and wondered more, when, failing to persuade her out of it, Delfina decided she would go, too. They would stay over night in Santa Barbara and drive out from there. It was not exactly the way she had meant to celebrate her birthday, still——

"You know you don't care the least bit about it," returned the girl. "To you it will only be an old adobe like dozens of others on your own plantation. I had forgotten to-morrow is your most important birthday, but I shall be back to help celebrate. I am hungry for a sight of the old place, but why should you go?"

"Oh, you expect so much! And if you should find the place overgrown with weeds, as is more than likely, you'll have a collapse and be sick down there!"

"But I shan't find it so!" insisted the owner of 'Treasure Trove'. "You've no idea how Phil enjoyed keeping it ever waiting for me! It was just a little romance of ours that I might step in any morning for breakfast. Oh, how long I have waited for the dream to come true!"

" But do be reasonable! " insisted the worried Delfina. " Think how many weeks it has been, and how rank the growth is in neglected gardens. You must expect to find it a wilderness! "

" No, I don't," said Anchor severely. " I am sure Dolores would not neglect it. She was my nurse, you know, and even when he was gone she knew I would come back some day. We shan't find it quite a wilderness! "

Delfina felt sick and half frightened, yet could not pluck up courage enough to say that Felipe never went near it, except to try and sell it, and that the old woman was, perhaps, dead.

As they rode out along the beautiful drive from Santa Barbara, she tried in vain to delay the expected shock as she saw Anchor's eyes grow smiling and eager at half-remembered land-marks. Beautiful places with well kept lawns alternated with fragrant groves of oranges, and Delfina had a mental picture of a roofless adobe, and a garden choked with rank growth, as a contrast.

Then the driver turned into a lane defined by hedges so broad and even they suggested a verdant driveway.

" That's the 'Treasure Trove' place, he remarked, pointing to a cottage where only the roof could be seen in the thick green. " It's been for sale quite a while I guess."

"For sale?" And Anchor's questioning, indignant eyes sought Delfina's.

"I drove two parties out here who thought of buying it, but something was wrong with the title, so I heard anyway. Why, they've been cleaning house since my last trip!"

Anchor had questioning eyes for Delfina and questioning words for the driver; but in the midst of her amazement, the carriage halted at a rustic gate woven of Manzanita boughs, very picturesque and very recent, as could be seen where the newly cut ends showed.

From somewhere back of the wealth of roses and heliotrope was heard an exclamation as the driver halted his team and sprang down to open the door.

Then a wild cry was followed by a vision of a slender, old, black, turbaned creature, who almost flung herself on Anchor, and laughed and cried in her delight.

"Ai! My God! Blessed Señorita! You coming at last to old Dolores! Oh, my baby, my baby! You grow tall now like the heliotrope where you used to hide. Holy Mother! I go crazy with the joy that I seeing you some more!"

Delfina sank back in the carriage, almost overcome by the shock of what she had not dared to hope for. Then she began to laugh almost as hysterically as Dolores, and stepped from the carriage.

" No, it is not a wilderness," she agreed. " It is a pretty little doves' place of a nest and looks as if we really might have walked in for breakfast and not gone away hungry."

" Sure ! " cried Dolores, promptly. " Each day I looking for you, each night your bed is ready just like he telling me,—you see ! "

" Oh, the dear room and the dear garden ! " breathed Anchor. " And my own dear, dear roses everywhere ! Ah, it is surely finer than it used to be. We could not afford rugs like this, nor cut glass rose bowls, nor those beautiful Mexican jars ! Delfina, how had you the heart to tell me it was neglected ? Phil ! my Phil ! here at last I really find you, my own Felipe ! "

The lips of the old woman tightened ominously, and her glad tears were dried at the sound of his name.

" The good God, he knowing best," she remarked. " So he sending for him before you coming back."

" And that man said it was for sale ! " said Anchor. " For sale ? How could he have got that idea ? "

Dolores made no reply. Delfina tried to broach some other subject, and failed awkwardly, so much so that Anchor was aware of a silence either would have been willing to break. She stared from one to the other, her eyes growing darker with a question—and a fear.

"Delfina," she cried sharply, "what is it, why don't you speak?"

"I—I never knew anything about the place!" protested Delfina. "I told you so—I told you ——"

"You do know something!" asserted Anchor. "That is why you begged me not to come! Tell me the truth—is it—is it sold?"

"Praise God, no, Señorita," said the old woman, fervently. "Listen, I will tell you. I never make that promise that I no telling you when you come. And now I seeing you again, he can kill me si he like, but I telling you!"

"Felipe? Kill you?"

"Holy Mary, no!" cried Dolores, crossing herself. "He try to kill me when he turning me out to sell the rancheria? I go die that time, but I having some good friends. That is over, gone! Then he come, the fine Señor American! The roof—see—he have mend! The garden he have made new again! Weeds and spiders,—that is all when he come! Ten, many years, all growing up. I try all the time keep that rose bush out, keep the road to the door out that grass. Then Felipe, he want money and he think he sell the rancheria. Ai—that was a day! I think the world is all come to an end and I move down by the river. I never hearing one word more until the Señor American he come in a carriage and fetch me back, and, Holy Mother! he having a big hunt to find me! Now you coming like he say you come some day. I am so happy I no can find words! And I have new dresses—so!" she added, holding up all the fingers of one hand. "I showing them to you!"

Anchor put out her hand to stop further speech of the delighted old woman.

"Never mind about the dresses. You shall always have dresses in plenty now. Why did the American gentleman do all this for the home if he did not buy it?"

"He say just one thing all the time,—that he doing it for Don Felipe. Don Felipe he meaning to do it and he go die too quick. That is what he say all the time. I put my hand in the fire for Señor American, but I think he tell the lie about that!" decided Dolores.

"Oh, it is a mistake!" cried Anchor desperately. "All a mistake! Phil never could have meant to sell it, never, never!"

Dolores quietly left the room, and Anchor turned to Delfina.

"Tell me who Phil's agent is. He may have had one who neglected the place and then secured another one who put it in good order again. Is that it?"

"Perhaps it is," agreed Delfina. "But if the place is all right now, what need you care?"

"I do care! I came here to find my brother, to find our home—his and mine! It is perfect, all I had dreamed it, and now——"

Dolores entered, carrying an ordinary piece of board, looking sulkily from one to the other, and nodding her turbaned head in decision.

"The Señor American, he taking this down from the gate with his own hand," she said sturdily. "He telling me to make the fire with it to bake my bread, and I taking it. But I making no promise! I putting it under my bed till you come back."

She held out the board that they could see the "For Sale" printed in large black letters across it. The amount of acres was added, the address of an agent in Santa Barbara, also address of owner, Felipe Darrett, Hermosa.

Anchor looked at it steadily while her eyes filled with tears which fell on her clasped hands. Dolores let fall the tell-tale board, and knelt beside her, burying her face in her lap, and murmuring prayers, beseeching, and blessings.

Delfina arose and walked to the door. She could have strangled the woman with a good will. Why not have left well enough alone?

"I doing all what the American telling me," protested Dolores, "and I making myself a carpet for your feet si you no crying any more!"

"You are not to blame, Dolores," said the girl at last, rising to her feet. "But tell me all. Who was the American Señor?"

"I not knowing. He calling himself the agent. He telling me each day how I putting the roses for you in the finest *olla,*—these roses!"

She touched drooping buds of Marechal Niels as she spoke, and Anchor arose and pushed past her to the door.

"Delfina, what does it mean?" she demanded. "Did you have it done?"

"No, I did not," returned Delfina emphatically. "It looks mighty like Mac Leighton's work! Who else knew your favorite rosebush here? Who else would have the—the impertinence to claim it was done by Felipe's order? Felipe had no money to do all this, and it has been done since his death! I should think Mac Leighton had enough to do attending to Felipe's business in Hermosa without coming down here."

"Felipe's business—in Hermosa?" And Anchor sank on a garden seat and stared at her. "Delfina, is it Phil's affairs he is working night and day to settle up? I thought—I thought it was only yours, your own estate, that he was settling it before your majority, as your guardian."

"Oh, what's the use going back to that?" demanded Delfina irritably. "I turned some property over to Felipe, and he—we speculated some, and I guess we usually lost. That's all. Mac Leighton claims the transfers were not legal and he is regulating affairs in his own fashion. He seems to have a mania for regulating other people's affairs," she added bitterly, as she glanced about the garden.

" Delfina, did Galbraith know he was doing Phil's work, the work Phil should have done? "

" Oh, don't drag Galbraith's name into it! Of course he knew, if any one did."

" And I dared to judge him! " said the girl thoughtfully. " And he—when under arrest for murder—thought only of one thing;—to send word to Mr. Leighton that he was not on his account to take one minute from the work he had to finish up! And that work was the work Phil left undone! Delfina, what does it mean? Mr. Leighton did not arrange this work here because of you, because of his position as your guardian, and he did not do it for me, because, when this work was begun, he did not know who I was. Then tell me, is it for you, or for Phil, he is working at Hermosa? "

" For—Phil? " repeated Delfina wonderingly. " Certainly this was done for Phil. At least, he tried to have Phil get the credit for it. And it cost money, considerable money! "

" Then Mr. Leighton paid for it out of his own pocket. Why? "

"Oh, how can I tell? He has been queer ever since he came back from Mexico. He probably did it only for a whim, for you."

"Yes," remarked Anchor, sceptically. "We also thought his work at Hermosa was all for you! We were both mistaken. I don't think we women count for much in your guardian's plans. Can't you see it's Phil's work he is doing, the work Phil should have done for your property as well as mine?"

"Anchor!" cried Delfina in angry amaze. "You are not turning against Felipe for Mac Leighton?"

"I never knew your Felipe," returned the girl drearily. "He thought I was tied there in the East, that I would never get back. And he thought—he must have thought I should be poor—helpless, and he took advantage of that! Your Felipe did not know that my old aunts were really very wealthy. I scarcely knew it while they lived! He thought this might be the only home left to me;—and he tried to take it from me! No, the Felipe I remember never, never could have done that. You are welcome to him, Delfina, welcome to every memory of him. Perhaps he was always a liar and I did not know it; I was only a little child and I loved him. But I am not a child now, and I couldn't love a liar!"

"No, you are not a child, and you don't seem to be more than half human!" retorted Delfina. "You are like Mac Leighton, like the American blood in him. People call him 'square,' and it just means that he is hard as nails. And so are you! When people loved Felipe they did not wait to ask if he was good or bad, they just loved him. He did not seem to me to have a drop of American blood in him, and I was glad of it. He suited me!"

"Yes, I see he did," observed Anchor. "And there's really no use in you and me quarreling about him now: he is dead and buried, and I must find out how much I owe the man who has done this work."

But the agent at Santa Barbara could not enlighten them entirely. He had only paid the gardeners and the masons. Mr. Leighton had personally attended to the furnishings. Then there was the six thousand of the mortgage.

"What mortgage?"

The ladies were informed that the mortgage was four years old. Mr. Darrett had also secured five hundred on it later for an option; but the sale was not effected, because the joint-heir had not arranged the conveyance enabling Mr. Darrett to act for her.

On being questioned further, he showed them those old records against the property wiped out, and a surplus left in his charge for a maintenance of the house and grounds for that season. The decaying vines and trees had been replaced, and in a year the fruit alone would pay for all improvements made. In fact, it would furnish a very substantial income for Miss Darrett.

"He also thought I was poor," said the girl as they took the train back to Olivette. "He thought I was poor and had only this one little corner to depend on for a living out here. How, how is one to measure gratitude for all this?"

"You'll find a way between you," said Delfina with a curt laugh. "It's a nice foundation for a flirtation!"

"A flirtation!" repeated Anchor turning on her tear-wet, indignant eyes. "Can't you see it wasn't for me, Anchor Darrett, he did it, but for Phil's sister? Flirtation! If I never knew another good thing he did, I would love him for just that, and I'll tell him so!"

Delfina laughed again, but said nothing. And the rest of the way home she was very silent, and there was a hard light in her narrowed eyes.

Leighton's devotion to her own affairs she had accepted as a tribute, but the revelations at "Treasure Trove" brought in so many perplexing possibilities that she was quietly furious. And most of her anger was directed against the girl who had brought only mystery and trouble to the Hermosa Valley. Delfina had just enough of her people's superstition to believe that a curse to Hermosa rode behind Anchor on El Diablo that first evening.

"I hate it worse than ever now; I hate the whole place!" she said viciously, as Roderiguez drove them from the station, and the boundaries of her own estate were reached. "Mac Leighton thinks he can twist every one around his finger, but he can't compel me to keep Hermosa after today. If Mr. Atterly still wants it, he can have it!"

"You surely can't mean that!" said Anchor, quietly. "I heard you acknowledge that the figures he offered were less—much less than it is worth."

"Oh, it was Mac Leighton and Galbraith told me that! Yes, and an old fogy lawyer! Leighton is thinking of what the rancho will earn, but I'm thinking of cash on the spot. Leighton is only fit for a sheep-herder anyway; rancho life suits him! He doesn't want Atterly's proposed improvements, that's what's the matter! He has tied up the water rights to the ranchmen and offered the Mission for sale with restrictions making it useless to Atterly. But that sanitarium can be a fact in spite of his restrictions!" She was lashing herself into a temper as she spoke, and her one bitter desire was to undo Leighton's work. "Not really mean it? Well, I'll show you! I swear on the cross to accept Atterly's price, cash from Atterly or any one else any minute, and they can build up a 'boom' town, or cover it with tanneries for all I care!"

"What do you call a cash payment?" asked Anchor. "Now, either Roderiguez or I might want to buy it, yet would not have all those thousands in our pockets this moment."

Roderiguez grinned without turning his head, and Delfina bit her lips feeling that she was laughed at.

"Cash payment means something to bind the bargain and the balance in a day, two days, or even a week. You think it is only a whim, but I do hate it, and Mac Leighton has made me hate it worse. You think I wouldn't sell it on the spot? Well, you just offer me the price. I'm of age to-day!"

Anchor drew a ring slowly from her finger.

"When my trunks came, you agreed this was worth a thousand," she said quietly. "It is an heirloom and, of course, I don't want to sell it. But will you accept it to bind the bargain until we can drive to Judge Bisham's and get you a draft to redeem it?"

Delfina took the ring, an exquisite diamond in an old fashioned setting of jet and pearls, but she stared incredulously at Anchor.

"You mean? You can't mean that you—"

she began; then halted as the absurdity of the question dawned upon her. The extremely simple life of the maiden aunts, as Anchor had described it, gave her no idea of wealth. Felipe had even spoken to her of the probable expense the sister might be to him, Felipe, who could not have purchased with his own money the old adobe he had died in!

" I mean I take you at your word, and find you a cash purchaser at Mr. Atterly's figures," said Anchor, simply. " Roderiguez is witness to the bargain, the first bargain of your actual majority! "

Delfina stared at her, suspicious and incredulous.

" Is this some of Mac Leighton's doings? " she demanded. " You don't know anyone in the county to raise that much money from! "

" Don Mac would suppose the same thing, so he has nothing to do with it," returned Anchor. " We pass Judge Bisham's house. If I can't redeem the ring there, of course the bargain amounts to nothing. But if you get a draft for your money, Hermosa is off your hands,—and your mind! "

" You speak of the price of Hermosa as if it were a string of beads or a pair of Indian moccasins," laughed Delfina, derisively. " Did your aunts leave you chests of this sort of sparklers? "

" They never thought or talked much about money," returned Anchor, "and I left before the estates were entirely settled, so I don't quite know what they amounted to. I don't think they had many chests of diamonds, but they had railroads and iron foundries, and what they had they left to me."

Delfina sat back in the carriage and stared at her. A girl who could be content with two small trunks of linens and woolens when she had money enough to drape herself in real laces was beyond her comprehension. And the fact that the girl had never even mentioned the inheritance, made Delfina feel suddenly small and flaunting in the gowns her friends usually heard the prices of.

"But it's nonsense! You to buy Hermosa?" she protested. "What could you do with it?"

"My guarantee is not nonsense," Anchor said, pointing to the ring. "As to Hermosa—well, it's a good investment. I may hold it for a rise, as you have done!"

Roderiguez chuckled as he listened. He brought the horses up with a flourish just then at the gate of the Bishams, and Delfina, after a moment of hesitation, descended from the carriage.

She felt tricked and indignant, yet could scarcely tell how it came about. She had simply been taken at her word, of course, but she followed Anchor up the steps, debating how she could retreat from her offer—for retreat in some way she meant to do if a way could be found.

XX

ANCHOR CHECKMATES ATTERLY.

But an hour later Roderiguez, with a delighted grin on his face, drove through the park to the terrace of Hermosa and watched over his shoulder a very sulky señora alight from the carriage. She carried a legal looking envelope from Judge Bisham's office and the diamond with the pearl and jet setting sparkled once more on the hand of the Señorita. Anchor halted a moment as the dogs came tumbling out with their welcome to her, and as she entered the outer court, she heard the indignant tones of Delfina, who had preceded her.

"Señor Leighton here, but could not wait for me? You see," she said, turning sharply to the girl, "our delay at that office has perhaps caused all sort of annoyances. Mac Leighton has been here to see me at last! Well, what word did he leave? Anchor, this is Mr. Medland, Señor Leighton's attorney. Oh, and here is Mr. Atterly! Does this gathering of legal lights mean any special trouble?"

"I think not," said Mr. Medland, a clean-shaven, elderly man, whom Anchor liked for his stately, old-style manner. "I think not, Mrs. Darrett, I only represent Mr. Leighton, and place the accounts of the estate in your hands at the termination of his guardianship and management of it."

Mr. Atterly's black eyes brightened.

"Absolutely settled at last, señora! Allow me to be the first to offer congratulations!"

And Delfina, who had had a trying day, appreciated the greeting and held out her hand.

"I scarcely feel like looking over accounts just now," she confessed. "Of course they are all right or Mac Leighton would not have sent them. Of course, if there are any special things requiring attention——"

There were a few, Mr. Medland thought, simply acknowledgments of the receipt of all documents pertaining to the estate. Perhaps, if Mrs. Darrett was fatigued, Mr. Atterly would assist with the clerical part of the work?

Mr. Atterly was only too delighted to be of service. Delfina sat at a table in the sala, and occasionally signed the required papers as they were passed over to her, while Anchor sat at some distance, buried in her own thoughts, observing Leighton's lawyer at times, and wondering if he held the key to Leighton's peculiar business methods. She saw Delfina's face flush as mortgages, names and amounts were read aloud, and was conscious that she regretted so public a review of the wild plunges she and Felipe had indulged in during their one brief year of authority.

And, as the long lists were checked off, marked "paid," "paid," "paid," Anchor's eyes opened in amazement at the immense sums expended by the manager of Hermosa during the brief while since Felipe's death.

All that stack of paper redeemed! Was that, could that be why he had sold the Old Mission? She had heard enough to know the Hermosa estate was not yet making big money returns. Yet, as the last document was duly chronicled, Mr. Medland passed them all over to her with a sigh of relief.

"Those bits of paper represent an immense amount of work, Mrs. Darrett," he observed. "I am happy to turn them over to you showing your estate clear of every penny of obligation. It is a fine property."

"Oh, I suppose so," agreed Delfina. "Fine for a man who can manage it; but for a woman ——"

"You know my offer for the property still stands," interrupted Mr. Atterly. "Mr. Leighton advised against its sale before, but now that you are your own mistress—— "

Anchor saw Mr. Medland's lips tighten at the eagerness in the other man's eyes. He slipped a rubber band about the packet of papers and laid them on the account book.

"In case you contemplate a transfer of the property, I shall be pleased to act for you at any time, Mrs. Darrett," he remarked; "and even if you retain it, my knowledge of the details of the estate is always at your service."

Delfina scarcely heard. Atterly's renewal of the old offer nonplussed her; she wished he had not broached it before the others. She knew she must make some reply, but that envelope from Judge Bisham's office lay before her on the table,—it had the effect of a lock and key on her tongue.

"I—I scarcely know what offers of help I can accept, just yet, or what offers for the property I shall have to reject," she said at last, as she fingered the envelope nervously. "I feel that you will think me a most unreliable business woman, Mr. Atterly, and I am, but the fact is—oh, Anchor, you got me into this muddle, you might help get me out!"

"I'll be very glad to," said the girl, coming forward, "and I shall be glad also, Mr. Medland, if you will help me as you offered to help Mrs. Darrett. The fact is, she sold Hermosa to me this morning."

Mr. Atterly grasped the edge of the table and half arose to his feet. His self control was jarred beyond speech, for he swallowed spasmodically twice before the words came.

"You—you are buying Hermosa?" he said at last, staring incredulously from Anchor to Delfina. "Why—it was understood——"

"Yes, I know," said the latter irritably. "My intention was to renew your option, but, someway—Oh, it started in a jest or a crazy offer I made, and she—well, she wanted to speculate, so someway she got it!"

"To speculate!" And he drew a breath of relief as he resumed his chair. "Oh, well, I am willing to pay enough of a margin to encourage Miss Darrett's new pastime."

But his smile was very nervous and it faded entirely as Anchor shook her head.

"I have not come into possession yet," she confessed, "and I shan't try to get rid of it until I prove a failure as a rancheress. I have an idea I shall enjoy it for quite a while before the novelty wears off."

"But there are numberless less expensive tracts to be found for amateur work of that sort," remarked Atterly, with attempted carelessness, though his lips were blue as he saw the chance of his life slipping through his fingers a second time, "and if you are holding this for a rise——"

"Yes, Anchor; that's what you said, wasn't it?" asked Delfina, eagerly. "My! Why, I have simply turned over to you the chance to make a lot of money!"

"Don't lament, Delfina," suggested the girl. "Not at least till you see me double my dollars."

"Double!" began Atterly, blankly. To put it at that figure was murderous to his chances of profit. At that moment he hated the girl who treated as a jest the thing on which his whole soul was set. As she looked at him she realized there was yet a hope in his mind that it would be more straightforward to eliminate.

"The place will not be for sale under any circumstances, Mr. Atterly," she said, decidedly. "I heard there was a plan of some promoters to buy it and divide it into small ranchos and building sites for a new town. I bought the place to prevent it."

Mr. Medland held out his hand to her impetuously, and she felt she had one staunch friend in her venture.

"Why, Anchor, you didn't tell me——"

"Delfina, dear, you only wanted the money and the freedom from the care of it. You did not suppose," she added, smiling, "that I was buying it for the sanitarium, or the 'boom' town?"

"It looks more as if it is to fit some of Mac Leighton's whims!" retorted Delfina.

"Is the sale actually concluded?" asked Atterly. Anchor picked up the envelope Delfina had carried from Judge Bisham's office.

"This contains a draft for the first fifty thousand accepted by Mrs. Darrett on the sale," she replied. "It is not entirely concluded, but it is a very good beginning."

A faint smile hovered about the lips of Mr. Medland, and his eyes had an appreciative twinkle as he glanced from the discomfited promoter to the girl's severe face. If she was conscious that she had forestalled one of the largest land schemes the county had yet seen, she made no sign.

Atterly's face was white as he fumbled the papers and avoided the eyes of the other man. He had been so sure, so very sure of Delfina. Once the power to sell was in her own hands, he felt as safe as if he already held the deed. His experience with her business methods, and Felipe's, her susceptibility to his flattery and sympathy, her pettish estrangement from Leighton,—all made him feel certain of her coöperation. And this girl had stepped between, with her unexpected resources and her little smile, and his castle of dreams crumbled into dust.

"The option given me on the place was so clearly understood," he persisted. "In fact, the money advanced on mortgage, was accepted by—by your husband as equivalent to an advance payment on the place, so that, legally, I am not certain but that——"

"Legally that obligation was wiped out," said Mr. Medland, "when Mr. Leighton paid off that mortgage at three o'clock yesterday." He drew the document from the package and held it up for inspection. "It was a close call, Mr. Atterly, a very close call! But the estate was absolutely clear of every obligation when Miss Darrett made the first payment on it to-day."

"Where is Señor Leighton all this time?" asked Delfina, impatiently. "I certainly had a right to expect him at the settlement."

"He was here," remarked Mr. Medland. "He waited some time, and only left because some unexpected and disconcerting news followed him here."

"What sort of news?"

"The docket was unexpectedly cleared of other cases at noon, and the case of Galbraith was called a week ahead of the expected time."

"Ah!"—there was condemned bitterness in Delfina's look and tone—"And he has rushed there, of course!"

"I think not. He started at once to catch the train at Olivette, but he is one of the witnesses subpœnaed, and he sent word to Galbraith that he would be back to-morrow morning to help."

"To help Galbraith!"

"He did not say. I offered, however, to take him word, and if there is nothing further in which I can be of use, I shall go at once."

There was not, and Anchor walked to the entrance with him, glad enough to escape from the stormy atmosphere of the sala.

"I congratulate you, Miss Darrett," said the old lawyer, shaking hands with her at parting. "You have done what Mr. Leighton wanted to do and couldn't!"

"Can you tell me, is he through with the rush of work he felt pledged to?" she asked, hesitatingly. "Does he mean to—to help Galbraith?"

He looked at her keenly.

"Then you know something of the work he felt pledged to, and"—with sudden comprehension—"that is why you have checkmated the men who were trying to down him? However it ends, Heaven bless you for that, Miss Darrett! Good-bye! I'll see you in court to-morrow. Help Galbraith? Well, yes: I know he means to try."

XXI

THE TRIAL.

The court room at Olivette was packed the second day, as it had been the first, but Anchor looked in vain for Leighton's face among the many from Hermosa. A terrific storm had swept the midlands to the north the preceding night. Telegraph wires were down in every direction and chaos reigned along the railroad over which, according to Mr. Medland's information, he must come. Twice his name had been called without bringing response, and the case went on. The witnesses for the state, principally Mexican workmen, had been heard, examined and cross-examined, and the people who believed in Galbraith were looking at each other anxiously. The case looked dark enough to please his worst enemies, and Luigo's face was radiant.

Only once had the prisoner showed any nervousness, and that was when the coat found in his room was shown to the jury, and the note and comb taken from the pocket.

The note called the wearer of the coat to the adobe the evening Felipe died. The broken comb proved that the appointment had been kept. A newly cast horseshoe had been found by Luigo where a horse had been tied near the adobe, and two hours after that appointment, Galbraith had stopped at the blacksmith's to have a lost shoe replaced; he had just dismounted when the warning came of the flood.

The comb was easily identified as that of Carmenita Alvarez, who had been known to meet Felipe Darrett at the old adobe. The day of Darrett's death, Galbraith had been drinking—had quarreled with Felipe Darrett on meeting him by chance in the road. Señor Leighton's interference had alone prevented trouble between them; he had taken Galbraith back to the Mission. But three witnesses had heard Galbraith threaten to shoot Darrett on sight if he ever went near the Alvarez home again.

The question of jealousy as a motive was brought up. But, while it was shown that Galbraith had indeed sent much material assistance to the Alvarez adobe, he had not gone there personally. Food, wine, and even clothing had been sent by a messenger, and always given secretly into the hands of the grandmother. Carmenita had not known who was helping them in their dark days.

It was further evidenced, however, that, of all the women of the valley, it was Carmenita he tried to save from the flood. When they were found next morning, she was dead in his arms, and her child, Jore, had been taken to the Mission rancho, to his adobe, where it had remained ever since.

Galbraith's only statement was that he had been out on one of the few ranchos to see about some cattle, and only got back as the flood came along. He had met no one on the range. Of the comb and the note, he did not know who had put them in his pocket, or how long they had been there. Yes, he had quarreled with Darrett for not providing for the girl; yes, he believed he had threatened to shoot him. But he was not dead sure of much that happened that day, for he had been celebrating Mac Leighton's return from Mexico!

The circumstantial evidence was strong for the State.

Anchor's face had gone white as the association of Felipe and the Mexican girl was sifted ruthlessly for the tragedy. But when the child was spoken of and named—the child she had saved—and the plain fact shown that it was the child of her own brother, then the color came back to her face in a wave of anger as she turned to Delfina, who regarded that part of the evidence with an assumption of contemptuous indifference.

Delfina had known, and Delfina had let Leighton take charge of the little waif. How small, how contemptible, he must think them all! And she—she had gone to him, had spoken of the lie, the insinuation that the child was his, and he had given no sign, he had not cast one shadow on the brother she had loved, or, rather, he had gathered the shadows to himself that the rest might live in the sunshine!

At the remembrance, the crowds of faces faded away, and she saw only the little ridge of stunted pines along the grazing lands, his face as he held her close, his voice speaking words never to be forgotten.

Galbraith, who saw that adorable flush creeping over her face, clenched his hands in anger that the lawyers had, despite his protests, dragged her into it. And she had heard, no doubt, all that awkward story of Carmenita and José! The others he did not mind,—they were easy to face; but their beloved Señorita!

The cross examination of Roderiguez had begun. He it was who had carried the note to the Mission rancho that day. Yes, there was a name on the envelope, but he did not read. He had met Señor Galbraith near the corrals, and had given him the note and Señor Galbraith had taken it and said "All right." No, he had not opened the envelope while Roderiguez was there; he had only put it in his pocket and ridden away. In which direction? Towards the new dam.

The new dam would be also in the direction of the old adobe.

Had Señor Darrett, himself, given him the note?

No. He had been going to the postoffice with the mail bag when a stable boy had run after him with the letter and had asked him to take that one letter first to the Old Mission. He had done so, and had given it to the first person he saw there. The first person was Señor Braith, and Señor Braith had looked at the writing and said, "Hell!" and then put it in his pocket and said, "All right!" and rode away.

On being shown the coat, he could not say at all if it was the one the Señor wore. All the ranchmen wore such a blouse with straps and pockets these days. They all looked much alike. He, Roderiguez, wore almost a fac-simile of it at that moment.

Workmen had seen Galbraith near the new dam a little later. Señor Leighton was there and had called to him. Nothing was heard of the conversation except Señor Braith's swearing about the masonry. He had remained only a few minutes and then had ridden up the road. They heard him call back about some stray cattle he was going to see about. Many workmen had heard this. Yes, there was a way he could have circled some fields and crossed to the old adobe without much chance of being seen.

For the third time since the trial, the name of Leighton was called and the announcement was made that he was not present. A telegram had been received the night before by Mr. Medland, stating that he was en route from San Francisco. He should have reached Olivette ten hours before, but all were aware of the havoc of the storm and the delayed trains and broken wires. The railroad people were trying vainly to open communication with the northern branch.

Then Mr. Atterly pushed his way forward to the desk of the State's attorney. In his hand was an open telegram and a murmur sounded in his wake as the people saw it; the wires were again connected!

For one instant he halted and swept his glance over the Hermosa witnesses, until it rested on Anchor, and instinctively she shrank from the veiled malice of it. Whatever news he bore, she felt it was something against Leighton, against her!

There were a few hurried words at the desk, and then the attorney turned to the judge.

"Your Honor," he said, slowly, "unless there is some great mistake here, this case will always lack its one most important witness for the state. The night train was wrecked at Bellefont last night and the name of McNeil Leighton is among the missing!"

Galbraith's eyes turned straight to Anchor. He saw her clutch at the seat in front of her and then sink back. Delfina caught her sharply by the wrist, and whispered frantically that people were looking, that she must rouse herself.

But it was not Delfina's voice that aroused her. Through the confused, drowsing sense of semi-consciousness, the stroke of iron-shod hoofs on a pavement came to her ears, the fierce beat of frantic riding and a shout of the people in the court yard,—what a shout!

Then there was the grind and push of many feet near the door, one hoarse, breathless voice, and cheers silenced by the sharp rap for order in the court.

And then, pushing through the crowding, eager mass, she heard his voice and opened her eyes to see him, hatless, dust-covered and haggard, pushing his way forward with hand uplifted.

"Your honor and gentlemen of the jury!" he said, speaking with difficulty. "I have walked and run and ridden seventy-five miles to reach here in time. I beg you to hear my testimony before the trial goes further, for I was the only person in the adobe when Felipe Darrett died!"

For an instant there was a choked silence in the crowded room, then a long indrawn breath, like a shudder, and the people turned to each other with strained looks and many a whitened face. The Mexicans from Hermosa, who understood, men and women alike, dropped to their knees, and rosaries clicked in many a brown hand.

The judge, Leighton's friend for years, was shocked for one moment into an involuntary expression of protest, and then sank back and motioned the clerk to administer the oath.

Some one offered the new witness a glass of water, which he accepted with a grateful nod. He was coatless, one sleeve half torn from his shirt, and with some difficulty he was using it to mop the perspiration from his face and neck.

Mr. Medland came forward with a borrowed coat, which he donned mechanically and grasped with some eagerness a proferred handkerchief.

To his strange, disheveled appearance, he seemed not to give a thought. Neither did he notice the crowd or any individual faces in it. His first glance had found Galbraith, to whom he raised his hand in mute salute, and then he sank back in the chair in utter weariness, utter resignation, akin to content. The race was over and he dared rest for breath.

The prosecuting attorney hesitated a moment. Where to begin with a witness like this was a problem. A glance at the people showed the temper of them. The witness might be a deliberate murderer, but just now he appeared to them heroic. The attorney for the state did not mean to remain indefinitely an attorney. He had various ambitions to be decided by the vote of the people, and he kept a weather eye open for popularity.

" You state that you were in the adobe at the time of Felipe Darrett's death; were you alone with him? "

" Yes, alone."

" Did you go there with him? "

"No, I was there by appointment. He asked me to meet him there."

" For what purpose? "

" He said to talk over some business affairs."

" What sort of affairs? and why was such an isolated place selected for the conversation? "

" The affairs were concerning the property of his wife. I was her guardian. He had attempted to dispose of some of the property to men who were at his home. He did not mean me to come in contact with them until he had gained my consent to the transfers. Neither did he want to go to my house, for Galbraith and he had quarreled that day and he did not want to risk meeting him again; and those are the reasons he gave me for making the appointment at the adobe."

" He asked you to meet him there? "

" He sent me a note with that request."

" Is this the note? "

Leighton looked at the creased, water-stained paper held out to him. " 'Mi Amigo!' Yes, that is my good friend's note! "

" But you were not in the flood, and this letter has been water-soaked! "

" It was in the coat wrapped around Galbraith when we found him. His clothes were dripping."

" After receiving the note, what did you do? "

" I rode to the adobe, where I found ' Mi Amigo ' preparing for me."

" What sort of preparation? "

" Putting cartridges in a pair of guns! "

A thrill ran over the court room, a muttered " My God! " came from Delfina as she realized that after all it had been Leighton—Leighton!

Even in her excitement, she turned to Anchor, grasping her hand spasmodically to see what effect the revelation had on the girl. But Anchor's face was a white mask, with wide, unseeing eyes staring straight out. She no longer saw Leighton or any other distinctive face, and the hand Delfina grasped was icy cold.

" Anchor! For Heaven's sake! " whispered Delfina, tensely. But Anchor only put aside her hand and did not turn her head. All the blood in her body seemed driven into her heart, all her power concentrated in the effort to hear, to comprehend!

"You discovered him putting cartridges in guns?"

"I did not discover what he had been doing until later. His back was to me as I entered the open door. He was at a table and the drawer was open. He closed it quickly and turned to speak to me."

"Then what followed?"

"We sat down on opposite sides of the table to talk; he remained beside the table drawer and nearest the door."

"What was the nature of the conversation?"

"He tried to convince me that my jurisdiction over the Hermosa estate, and my guardianship of Manuel Gonzales' daughter ended when she married. Failing in that, he tried to buy me to transfer all my power to him at once—that day. I refused to consider such a proposition, and told him I must see the accounts of the estate for the year during my absence in Mexico. These he refused to show me. I then stated my intention of taking up the management of the estate where I had laid it down a year ago, and, so far as possible, to give it back to Manuel Gonzales' daughter on her majority as clear of obligations as when I carelessly left it in their hands."

"Well, what next?"

"He swore I could not do it, and incidentally swore that I should not see his wife again concerning the estate, or anything else."

"To what 'else' did he refer?"

"A Mexican girl, who was the mother of his child and who would have starved but for Galbraith and some of her Mexican neighbors. Galbraith quarreled with him about it that day and threatened to send Father Rey to his wife concerning it."

"You heard this quarrel?"

"Yes. We met Darrett on the road. He was surprised and sulky at my return from Mexico at the wrong time. He realized that his land deals were off if I interfered; wanted me to ride on into the village with him and make the transfers he needed. When I refused and said we must go over all the accounts for the year before considering sales, he blamed Galbraith for influencing me, and for carrying reports as to the management of the estate during my absence. From that the subject was turned to the girl, and Galbraith threatened to shoot him if he ever went near her again after neglecting her when she needed friends and money and was no longer able to work. This neglect was during Darrett's absence in San Francisco. The threat of shooting was overheard,—the only thing there was to connect Galbraith with Darrett's death."

"Whose coat was it that was found in Galbraith's room, containing the note of appointment?"

"Mine. I put it on him when we found him, and it had hung in his room, unnoticed and forgotten since the flood."

"Were you armed when you went to the meeting with Darrett?"

"I was not."

"Will you tell the court how the shooting occurred?"

"Darrett expressed a foul suggestion as to my interest in the women of his family. I called him a liar. He jumped for me and I caught him by the throat and left arm to force him back into the chair. He drew a gun from his pocket with his right hand, and had it against my side before I realized he was armed. He snapped it once, but it did not go off. Then I caught his right hand and the fight commenced for the gun. During the struggle it went off. As he fell he caught at the table drawer, pulling it open. There I saw the cartridges and the other gun he was loading when I arrived."

"Did you at any time during the struggle secure possession of the gun?"

"No, except with my hand closed over his."

"Did your fingers at any time during the struggle touch the trigger?"

There was a pause, caused by the judge making a gesture for delaying reply.

"The witness is not called upon to incriminate himself," he observed.

"Thank you, judge," said Leighton. "But I am willing to tell all I am certain of, and I can't ever be quite certain of that!"

Galbraith swore softly and the judge looked troubled. Through all the room there were whispered exclamations and smothered protests.

"I mean that in such a struggle it would not be possible for either man to say that his finger had, or had not, touched the trigger. I was trying to get the gun from him. It went off before I secured it. When he fell, the gun was still in his hand.

"How long did he live?"

"Only long enough to speak one word."

"What was that?"

"A woman's name."

"Then what did you do?"

"I sat down and looked at him, and figured out my chances of being accused of his murder by the men who almost had the Gonzales estate in their hands for a merely nominal sum. I had, as it was, only a very brief time in which to adjust the financial affairs of the property before my guardianship of Mrs. Darrett expired. I further concluded that even if Mrs. Darrett became aware that a quarrel with me had led to his death, her natural prejudice would make my settlement of the estate a very difficult matter. I had made a big mistake in leaving the estate to the sole care of Mrs. Darrett and her husband that year. I meant to rectify it so far as I could, and the only hope I had of accomplishing it was to keep my name from being connected with Darrett's death."

"How came the comb in the pocket with the note?"

"I saw it on the floor of the adobe before I left. I took it for fear suspicion should fall on the girl who had met him there."

"Was Galbraith aware you went to the adobe?"

"No. He was still rather wrought up over his quarrel with Darrett, and I did not tell him that day. How much he suspected afterwards, I don't know. But when the coat and note were brought up as evidence, then he sent me word to lose not an hour on his account, but go ahead with the work I had so nearly accomplished. I realized then that he meant to help me to time, and I realized also that he must know."

Galbraith's face flushed uncomfortably as this reference to his devotion caused a rustle in the room, and the turning of many eyes in his direction. To be tried for murder was one thing, but to face a flutter of belated admiration was a more difficult proposition.

"The 'time' he helped you to was certainly delayed until the eleventh hour," observed the attorney. "Can you tell the court why your silence was so prolonged?"

"I had to raise money on my property to make good the loans of the Gonzales estate. I did this in several instances with only my word as a guarantee. Three days ago my place, the Old Mission, was sold to secure the money I needed to square up, for naturally I did not know what the result of my evidence here would be! Two days ago, I settled the affairs of the Gonzales estate and my guardianship of Mrs. Darrett expired. One day I took to settle the personal obligations I mentioned. I expected to reach here before the trial was more than commenced. The wreck changed that. But I'm here now!"

There was a certain challenge in the final words and the tone. Galbraith, glancing lazy blue eyes around the room, decided it would not be taken up. Hermosa, and Olivette as well, looked quite satisfied that Felipe Darrett was good and dead!

The State's attorney glanced from judge to jury and back to Galbraith undecidedly. The court came to the rescue. Was there any further evidence against the prisoner at the bar? The attorney for the State had nothing sure to offer. The court, with slight comment, passed the case to the jury, and, without leaving their seats, the verdict of " Not Guilty " was rendered.

Leighton made his way to Galbraith and they clasped hands without a word.

" Case of the State against Galbraith dismissed. Call the next case! " said the judge, mechanically, and then leaned forward to shake hands with Leighton.

" You look fit for a hospital," he observed. " But I don't know which of you to envy the most the possession of your friend! "

" Oh—I'm not in it with Braith," said Leighton, wearily. " I was too late for the round up. And the tough thing for him was, that he did not know how much, or how little, I had to do with Darrett's death."

" I knew you were doing the work he should have done," growled Galbraith, " and as soon as I found out it wasn't the woman you were working for, that was enough to know! Can't we get out of this mob? I'd as soon have the Mexicans yelling for my scalp as this! "

As the two emerged from a side door there were cheers and congratulations from the crowd waiting there to catch sight of them.

Leighton looked from right to left with an impatient frown. His utter exhaustion precluded any feeling beyond the one absorbing desire for rest.

"Get me some place where I can sleep, Braith!" he implored. "I've run the race, and I've won by a neck, but I'm done up, old man, I'm done up!"

As they reached the crossing, a carriage moved slowly past, impeded by the crowd at that point, and Delfina's profile, indignant and animated, was turned toward them. She was leaning forward, talking to Mr. Atterly, who faced her from the front seat, and, beyond her, sat Anchor, pale, apathetic, sunk back in the shadows.

Both men halted at sight of her. As she saw Leighton so close she leaned forward, her eyes growing wider, her face paler. Her hands crept up to her throat and suggested to him only absolute, breathless terror.

For one instant his gaze held hers in a very agony of hopelessness; then he stepped back and bowed slightly in acceptance of what fate had brought him. He heard a little shriek from Delfina, who had just caught sight of him, and the carriage shade was pulled down with a snap.

Leighton laughed drearily as he turned away.

"Where's that bed, Braith?" he asked. And then, after a little, "Was she in there with that crowd? Did she hear all that damnable stuff about him? Poor little Señorita. She will never laugh again under the Mission palms!"

"She worshiped him—or pretty nearly that." said Galbraith, moodily. "We can't expect her ever to laugh with us again!"

"No," agreed Leighton, "that's the hell of it!"

XXII

DELFINA SURRENDERS.

One long day and night of hysterics on Delfina's part, railings, upbraidings, and threats against Leighton.

Mr. Atterly had accompanied them home, another lawyer had been sent for, and there were long, headaching hours of sifting the evidence at the coroner's inquest and the later testimony in court. Somewhere they must find for her a legal reason for the arrest of Leighton. She would take it to the supreme court. This Hermosa county was no place to try him, or Galbraith, either: He had won sympathy for even Galbraith! He had made Felipe a trickster and her a laughing stock!

The judge and jury were fools! Who was to tell whose hand was on the trigger of that revolver? It was all planned before the trial; the judge was Leighton's friend, everybody knew that! It was all put up to fool the people. She believed now that Leighton and Galbraith had followed Felipe there and murdered him. Leighton's coming into court like that was only a part of a plot to blind the public. The judge and jury were in it, too, for all she knew! And it could all have been put up like that, she believed.

But at this juncture, the consulting attorney drily reminded her that the wreck of the train at Bellefont could not very well have been "put up," even with the help of judge and jury, and that public opinion was such that it would be useless to try and convict Leighton of anything. In fact, the people could not do enough to make up to Galbraith for the action against him led by the Castro faction: All of the name had already been warned out of the Hermosa Valley, and Luigo, for his own safety, had been sent south from Olivette.

"Believe me, Mrs. Darrett," he said, finally, "the case is best left alone. Leighton's stupendous work for the dead man's wife, his child, and even his sister (for the story of her long illness at Old Mission had leaked out!), all this would weigh heavily in his favor, even if there had been a crime to balance. But there was not a vestige of evidence to show that there had been."

Delfina had hysterics again at the mention of the child, which she considered in very bad taste; in fact, such reference was nothing less than insulting to her. So Mr. Atterly dismissed the consulting attorney who had betrayed so little sympathy, and took up alone the task of comforting Mrs. Darrett.

For Anchor was of no use whatever. She only wandered restlessly in and out of the rooms, or sat numb and dumb under the palms of the court. She had not spoken Leighton's name, and Delfina's wordy emotions took on an added grievance at her silence.

"Of course, it doesn't hurt you, all this scandal about the woman and child; but you might have a little human sympathy, Anchor!"

"It did not hurt you, either, so long as Mr. Leighton buried the mother and took care of the child and no one else knew it!"

"Knew it!" cried Delfina. "Everybody knew it, of course, except you, but they did not know I knew it! And as if I had not had enough to bear, it had to be told over again before that gaping crowd! Oh, Mac Leighton was careful no one should miss hearing it all!"

"I doubt now if he told half," said the girl, wearily, "and he would not have told that if he could have secured absolute justice for Galbraith without it. Any one could see that just as they could see our great debt to him,—a debt greater than we can ever pay."

"Debt?" repeated Delfina. "Oh, you mean Hermosa? Well, you're not much of a business woman after all! He accepted the charge of the estate from my father and he had no right to let Felipe and me run it for ourselves. I wasn't capable, and of course we made mistakes. Every one seems to think it so wonderful that he simply kept his word to my father. It wasn't for me he did it, I see that now! He made up the losses of Hermosa because he promised father, and," she added, with tingling bitterness, "he did Felipe's work here, and at 'Treasure Trove,' because he had killed Felipe!"

Only a little shiver, as if from cold, showed that her arrow had struck. No word, no protest; only a dumb acceptance of facts, irritating to Delfina, who wanted words.

"I have telephoned for some friends," she continued, "I'll simply die if I have not some life about me so long as I do stay, and that won't be a day longer than your lawyers and mine require to fix up the papers. I'm glad the place is off my hands forever! I'm going straight to Paris. What's to become of you?"

"Me? I have not thought. I was asked to visit at Judge Bisham's, and I may accept. Or his widowed sister might come here, perhaps. I shall manage someway."

"Yes, I should think you could," observed Delfina. "On the money the Bishams say you have, you could manage pretty well anywhere! That lawyer asked me if it were true you had bought Old Mission. They seem to think if you could buy Hermosa you can buy the earth!"

"Oh, I'm so glad, so glad now that I did buy it!" breathed the girl, softly. "I can give it back now, can't I? It will help some—a little—to balance 'Treasure Trove!'"

"Good Heavens!" cried Delfina, dumfounded by this last revelation. "Do you mean that it actually was you who bought it? Do you hear this, Mr. Atterly, two ranchos in one week! The girl is crazy!"

"I regret that I am not afflicted with the same sort of madness—and luck," remarked Delfina's legal friend. "Then you have acquired all but a few little garden plots of what was in the old days the famous Leighton rancho. In any other country it would be considered almost a principality. It is larger than many a kingdom!"

"Anchor, do sit down and talk instead of going about in that restless, doleful way!" said Delfina, fretfully. "I'm so nervous, I'm just sick as it is, and you make me feel as if there is a funeral in the house!"

"I feel like one!" said the girl; and Delfina shuddered again.

"You are always here when trouble comes, Mr. Atterly!" she sighed. "Do you remember the other awful day? It's no wonder I hate every foot of this valley! I never look out of that window that I do not seem to see the crowd trooping through the park to bury that Mexican girl.

That was Mac Leighton's work, and I've a good mind to undo it yet!"

"In what way?"

"Such tribes have their own burial grounds, haven't they? Can't I make them move her?"

"I think," remarked Anchor, quietly, "it would be better to bring Felipe over here, than to do what you suggest. The girl has surely earned grave room beside Felipe Darrett. Let her have it."

"Anchor, have you no feeling?" cried Delfina. "I never expected you could speak of Felipe so heartlessly." Then, after a few quiet moments with her handkerchief to her eyes, she whimpered, "I do hope you won't make bad worse, by having anything to do with the child after I am gone!"

Anchor made no reply, and, after a little pause, Delfina lowered the handkerchief and looked at her. Something in the girl's face made her forget her whimpering.

"You don't mean that you intend to take that child?" she demanded.

"The only thing to prevent me," said Anchor, quietly, "is that I can't see how any Darrett could ask a further favor from Mr. Leighton."

"Now, what did she mean by that?" queried Delfina of Mr. Atterly, as Anchor left the room. "Thank goodness there are some live people coming this evening. Anchor is so hard on my nerves!

Did she mean that she was too prejudiced against him to accept any favor? or did she mean he had done too much already for any Darrett to ask more?"

But Mr. Atterly had no idea. He agreed that Miss Darrett was at times perplexing.

XXIII

"GOOD-BYE TO HOPE."

That night Delfina's guests brought music and laughter into the sala. And after three hours of the chatter, of the games, and of supper, Anchor stole out alone to one of the little stone balconies where the sound of voices and laughter were softened by distance. Only the stars gave light in the dark blue to show the winding paths in the park where the crushed shawls showed white. Once she thought she saw a figure cross the path and move towards the house, but concluded she was mistaken when no one came into the circle of light streaming from the windows of the sala, and making blacker by contrast the dense shadows of the shrubbery.

Some of the house servants had gathered under the balcony in a little group, looking into the windows of the sala and listening to a girl singing there. They spoke together in subdued tones, but now and then sentences came up to the balcony, and one of them caused her to lift her head, alert, listening!

" Anita telling Roderiguez how it is sold and how they all may be going away. Don Mac he going to-night or to-morrow, gone already maybe to Mexico. He never coming back this time!"

"Sure, he come back," remarked another, hopefully.

"No, Anita say how Señor Braith stay behind to sell all the horses. Then he taking Diablo, Anita and Carmenita's baby, and they all going to some old rancho in Mexico. Perenza she lay in bed all day, she say she no will go, and she no will stay except Don Mac stay, too! That old woman most crazy."

"Don Mac he so no rich any more—no?"

"Oh, these Americans never getting all poor!"

"He never marry our Señora now."

"How the Señora marrying him when Don Felipe die fighting him?" demanded another. "How could that be?"

None of them knew. And then the talk drifted to other things, and the group scattered as one or another was called to duty elsewhere.

A carriage was called a little later, and three laughing girls and their brother bade good night and were driven away. Mr. Atterly and another caller followed, leaving only a couple of girls who were to remain for the night, and who were playing queer dances, and dancing them to Delfina's delight, for her laugh rang high and clear through the open windows.

And still Anchor sat there on the low seat, her arms resting on the carved railing and her chin on her palms, staring out into the night, hearing no longer the laughter below, seeing nothing but the pictures in her own wearied brain.

To-morrow! Perhaps to-night! Going from his own home, beggared because of the help he had given to others!

Now she knew what her restlessness had meant; she had waited from hour to hour for some word from him, some sign! Without it, how could she go or send? How let him know she had seen "Treasure Trove" and realized how deeply he had paid for the mere chance of a finger on that trigger? How offer him Old Mission to help pay the Darrett debt?

And José! Had he not already done enough without the continued burden of her brother's child? Her mind was made up,—there was no one but herself to do what was needed to be done. She would go for José, and she would tell him.

A silvery chime of midnight sounded from a clock below. Four hours until dawn,—and at dawn she would be under the Mission palms again!

The dancing had ceased. One of the girls sang some little good-night song, and then her fingers, moving idly over the keys, struck the prelude to Tortis's "Good-bye," and the girl on the balcony dropped her head in her arms with a choking sob.

"All the to-morrows will be as to-day!" sang the girl in the sala, with sorrowful cadence.

"The cord is frayed, the cruse is dry,
The link must break and the lamp must die
Good-bye to hope!—Good-bye—good-bye!"

The girl on the balcony arose with a half moan of protest. The light from the hall streamed out across the balcony and outlined her every movement to a man who stood hidden in the shadows of the shrubbery across the drive. He could see her heaving shoulders and her hands clasping and unclasping; even the tears wet on her cheek he could see as the light touched it.

"What are we waiting for—you and I
A fleeting look—a stifled cry!
Good-bye forever—good-bye—good-bye!"

He could hear the sharp indrawn breath of her sobs, then the laughter and gay good-nights in the sala. And as the chattering groups ascended the stairs, and Delfina was heard inquiring for her, she turned swiftly and disappeared in the interior.

XXIV

THE RIDE AT THE DAWN.

At the first streak of dawn she crept down the great stairway and out to the stables where a sleepy groom stared at her as at a ghost. But some whispered directions and a coin tied his tongue and made his fingers nimble, and a few minutes later he watched the Señorita walk her horse silently over the grass where horses were not allowed to step. Before she had reached the gate the drifting fogs of dawn had swallowed her from sight.

At the gate of the Mission stable she saw a horse held, saddled! It was El Diablo and her heart crept into her throat, choking her. She was barely in time then! But how—how could she speak? What could she say with that mad thumping of heart and brain?

Even to the stable boy she could scarcely articulate, but he grinned and nodded his head.

"The Señor—he just going!" he said, and moved El Diablo a little distance from the strange animal at whom he was pointing his ears menacingly. Then she heard a step, the jingle of a spur, and the next instant Galbraith loomed up through the fog.

He halted, dumfounded at sight of her, tongue-tied as herself. Then he spoke in Spanish to the boy, who relinquished El Diablo into his hands and disappeared.

Galbraith had raised his hat at sight of her, but did not speak while the boy was in hearing. Then he went nearer and drew a letter from his pocket.

"I was just going to you," he said, simply. "He told me to send this by noon, but I—I thought you might have word to send and I was taking it myself as soon as he got out of sight."

"Out of sight!" she said, mechanically, staring at the envelope. "Has he—has he——"

"He started not five minutes ago for the station above Olivette. He didn't want to meet people in the town. I tried to keep him another day, but he learned yesterday it was you who bought the Mission, and at Hermosa last night he learned you had bought the Gonzales rancho as well. He started to see you last night, but he came back wild, and so—he is gone!"

"Oh—I came to give him back the Mission—to beg him to take it—and to ask him for José!" she faltered. "Oh, Braith! Help me, help me!"

"You mean you don't hate us both for dragging your brother's name through all that, for letting the public know? Señorita, if you don't, for Mac's sake think fast and speak plain!"

She opened the letter and cried out in protest at the "Good-bye" with which it began.

"Oh, he was there last night!" she half sobbed. "He meant to see me, he meant to tell! Tell me," she said abruptly, crushing the letter inside the vest of her habit. "Was it because he heard I had bought the ranchos that he left without seeing me? Tell me true!"

"It was one of the reasons. He is a poor man now. He has only a little Mexican property left. It may pan out, and it may not!"

She gathered up the reins, a look of resolve in her eyes, to which the quick tears sprang.

"Good-bye," she said, briefly. "Which road did he take?"

"You are—you are going after him yourself?" he demanded, catching her bridle.

"I am going after him myself," she said, plainly emphatic. "I don't know what he will say and I don't care what any one thinks! Oh, Braith, you know—you must know—the money is no use to me if it sends him down there alone! Money! I would go with him if I had to live in a mud hut in the hills!"

"Wait!"

Galbraith was unsaddling El Diablo with lightning speed, and the girl comprehending his intention without a word, slipped from the saddle which he quickly transferred.

"He had ten minutes start, but El Diablo, with your weight, will catch him. Adios, Señorita! God Almighty clear the way for you!"

He crushed the hem of her skirt to his lips as she leaped to the saddle. Then he stepped back, pointing the way, and El Diablo sprung forward like an arrow. No curveting tricks, no side stepping dances! He seemed to realize that this ride at dawn left no time for play.

Some Mexicans, stretched in the shadows of the hedge, sleeping off the too potent effects of new brandy, started up at sound of the thunder of hoofs bearing down on them, and crossed themselves in vague dread as they caught sight of the girl's white face and the great eyes dark with intensity as she swept past looking neither to right nor left.

"Holy Mother!" muttered one, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "It is the Señorita of the Moccasins,—or it is her spirit! She was seen like that the night of the flood! She rides somewhere to save some one! Blessed Mother, watch over her!"

The memory of that other ride in the dusk came to her as she bent low and whispered to El Diablo, and lifted her head to scan the open road.

Over the fields the growing light picked out clearly now the hedges and hollows, and far to the east a growing pink pierced the sky of mauve and silver.

Her heart gave a happy throb as she saw it, and she patted the shoulder of El Diablo, and laughed softly, and whispered:

" Run—run Diablo! It is an omen. We rode into the shadows and horror that other time, but now the new day is before us, the new day and the sunshine! "

Just as the first lance of gold shot through the blush in the east, she heard, far down the valley, the shrill whistle of the coming train, and flashed past the startled Mexican boy who had driven the cart from the Mission with Don Mac's traveling traps. And a few moments later El Diablo thundered up the rise to the little station where one man paced alone, with hands clasped back of him and head drooped, waiting.

If any words of greeting were spoken, neither could ever remember what they were. He raised his eyes to see her leaning forward on El Diablo, her hand outstretched to him! He lifted her from the saddle and for the second time she heard the broken murmurs of his tones close to her ear, and this time she felt tears, not her own, on her cheek.

" My Señorita! My little girl! " he half groaned. " How can I say good-bye to you now? "

"I—I didn't come to say—that!" she whispered. "Diablo—Diablo—never would have made the run for just—'Good-bye!'"

And then Diablo, snuffing and prancing at the rumble of the approaching train, heard the glad laugh of Don Mac as he clasped the Señorita in his arms.

El Diablo saw or heard no more than that, for he bolted for home as the scream of the train cut the air of sunrise.

Around a little knoll a man on a reeking horse blocked the way and caught him, and El Diablo recognizing a Mission mate, halted and surveyed the foaming animal that had kept in sight all the way, lest some mishap should have chanced El Diablo's rider.

The newcomer slipped from the saddle and stood listening, listening to the slowing train, the slight pause, the sliding open of the baggage car door, the sound of voices, and then the music of the engine bell smothered by the sound of the wheels rolling southward faster and faster, until only the echoes came back drifting along the little hollows where the fog still rested.

And when the last echo drifted into silence, the man flung himself face downward in the grass by the road. The horses grazed near, glad of the breathing space after that mad run, and El Diablo lifted his beautiful head and regarded with curiosity the man lying there in the grass with his face hidden in his arms.

A few hours later a girl in a riding habit, and a man whom Dolores called "Señor Americano" stood before an old priest in the little adobe of "Treasure Trove." The dead past was buried by the vows made over their clasped hands, and its ghost has never risen to trouble them.

* * * * * * * *

The boy, José, rides now over the ranges beside his adored Don Mac and his adorable Doña Anchor. He has the beautiful eyes of Felipe, but his nature is more that of the devoted Spanish girl who sleeps in the grounds of Hermosa.

Delfina never forgave the marriage of Anchor. The shock was so great that she started at once for the East, whither Mr. Atterly followed soon after to comfort her. She did not even send cards to the Leightons when the wedding occurred, six months later.

The doves circle as of old over the belfry of Old Mission and peace lies over the land of Hermosa. Perenza and Dolores sit by the hour in the patio and watch a tiny baby boy and girl playing under the vines, or splashing with the doves in the fountain.

The boy is called Braith, and when he asks questions about the big man he was named for, and who used to live here in the patio, but who rode away one day and never came back, he wonders why Don Mac always gives him an extra kiss, but tells him not to ask questions, and why the tears come into his mama's eyes, and she always sends him to see if sister is awake, or asleep, or playing too long in the sun!

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